



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>





600064769





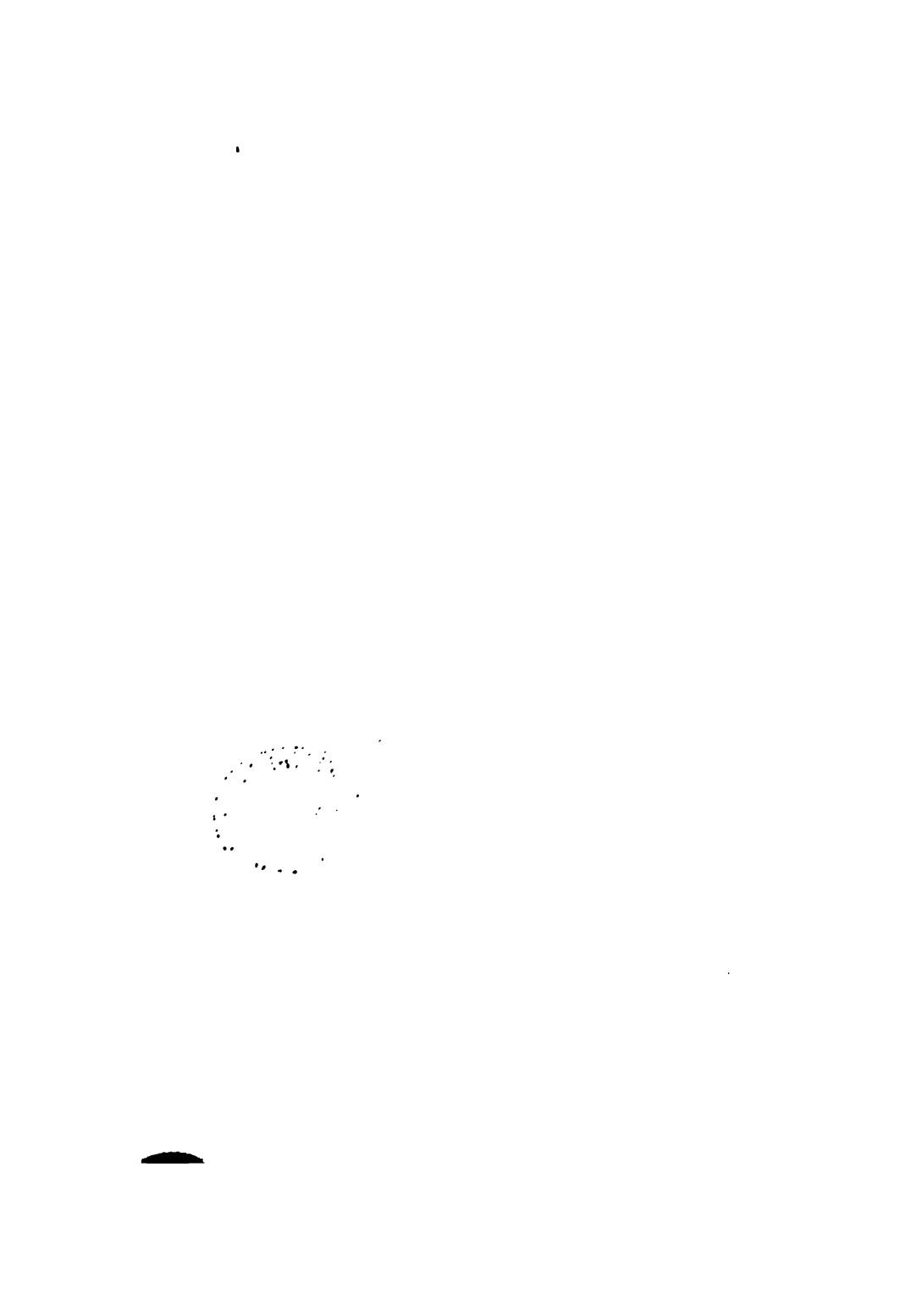


600064769





POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.



POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

"JULIET'S GUARDIAN," AND "DECEIVERS EVER."

"No. Vain, alas! th' endeavour
From bonds so sweet to sever.
Poor Wisdom's Chance
Against a glance
Is now as weak as ever."
Moore's Melodies.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



London:

TINSLEY BROS., 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1880.

[All rights reserved.]

251 . f . 605 .

W. S. JOHNSON, MASSAU STEAM PRESS, 60, ST. MARTIN'S LANE,
LONDON, W.C.

C O N T E N T S.

CHAPTER I.

THE VICAR'S FAMILY	PAGE 1
------------------------------	-----------

CHAPTER II.

KYNASTON HALL	22
-------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

FANNING DEAD ASHES	48
------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAY RECTOR	66
--------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

" LITTLE PITCHERS "	87
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

	PAGE
A SOIRÉE AT WALPOLE LODGE	110

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING REVERIES	134
----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEMBER FOR MEADOWSHIRE	149
--------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

ENGAGED	176
-------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

A MEETING ON THE STAIRS	194
-----------------------------------	-----

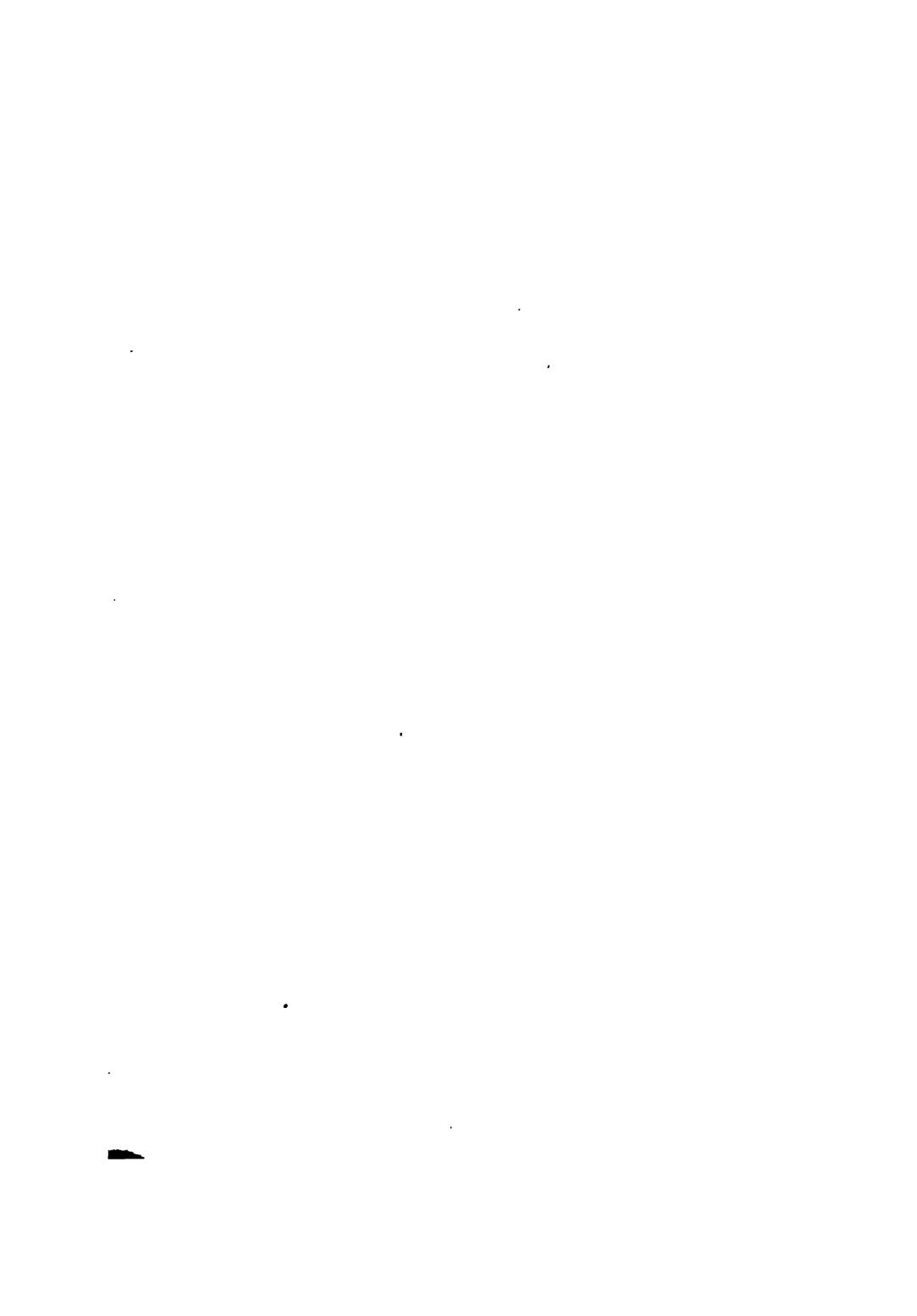
CHAPTER XI.

AN IDLE MORNING	215
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII.

THE MEET AT SHADONAKE	236
---------------------------------	-----

POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.



POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE VICAR'S FAMILY.

AMONGST the divers domestic complications into which shortsighted man is prone to fall, there is none which has been more conclusively proved to be an utter and egregious failure, than that family arrangement which, for lack of a better name, I will call a “composite household.”

No one could have spoken upon this subject with greater warmth of feeling, nor out of the depths of a more painful experience, than could the Rev. Eustace Daintree, sometime vicar of the parish of Sutton-in-the-Wold.

Mr. Daintree's family circle consisted of himself, his mother, his wife, and his wife's

sister, and I should like to know how a man could expect to lead a life of peace and tranquillity with such a combination of in-harmonious feminine elements !

There were two children also, who were a fruitful source of discord and disunion. It is certain that, had he chosen to do so, the Rev. Eustace might have made many heart-rending and harrowing revelations concerning the private life and customs of the inhabitants of his vicarage. It is equally certain, however, that he would not have chosen to do so, for he was emphatically a man of peace and gentleness, kind hearted and given to good works ; and was, moreover, sincerely anxious to do his duty impartially to those whom Providence or fate, or a combination of chances and changes, had somehow contrived to bring together under his roof.

Things had not always been thus with him. In the early days of their married life, Eustace Daintree and Marion his wife had had their home to themselves, and right well had they enjoyed it. A fairly good

living backed up by independent means, a small rural parish, a pleasant neighbourhood, a pretty and comfortable vicarage-house—what more can the hearts of a clergyman of the Church of England and his wife desire? Mr. and Mrs. Daintree, at all events, had wished for nothing better. But this blissful state of things was not destined to last; it was, perhaps, hardly to be expected that it should, seeing that man is born to trouble, and that happiness is known to be as fleeting as time or beauty or any other good thing.

When Eustace Daintree had been married five years, his father died, and his mother, accepting his warmly tendered invitation to come to Sutton-in-the-Wold upon a long visit, took up her abode in the pleasant vicarage-house.

Her visit was long indeed. In a weak moment her son consented to her urgent request to be allowed to subscribe her quota to the household expenses—this was as good as giving her a ninety-nine years' lease of her quarters. The thin end of the wedge

thus inserted, Mrs. Daintree *mère* became immovable as the church tower or the kitchen chimney, and the doomed members of the family began to understand that nothing short of death itself was likely to terminate the old lady's residence amongst them. For the future her son's house became her home.

But even thus, things were not at their worst. Marion Daintree was a soft-hearted, gentle-mannered little woman. It cannot be said that she regarded the permanent instalment of her mother-in-law in her home with pleasurable feelings ; she would have been more than human had she done so. But then she was unfeignedly fond of her husband, and desired so earnestly to make his home happy, that, not seeing her way to oust the intruder without a warfar which would have distressed him, she determined to make the best of the situation, and to preserve the family peace and concord at all risks.

She succeeded in her praiseworthy efforts, but at what cost no one but herself ever

knew. Marion's whole life became one propitiatory sacrifice to her mother-in-law. To propitiate Mrs. Daintree was a very simple matter. Bearing in mind that her leading characteristics were a bad temper and an ungovernable desire to ride rough-shod over the feelings of all those who came into contact with her, in order to secure her favour it was only necessary to study her moods, and to allow her to tread you under foot as much as her soul desired. Provided that she had her own way in these little matters, Mrs. Daintree became an amiable old lady. Marion did all that was needful ; figuratively speaking, she laid down in the dust before her, and the Juggernaut of her fate consented to be appeased by the lowly attitude, and crushed its way triumphantly over her fallen body.

Thus Marion accepted her fate, and peace was preserved in her husband's house. But by-and-by there came somebody into the family who would by no manner of means consent to be so crushed and trodden under foot. This somebody was Vera Nevill.

In order duly to set forth who and what was this young woman, who thus audaciously set at defiance the powers that were, it will be necessary that I should take a brief survey of Marion's family history.

Marion, then, be it known, was the eldest of three sisters ; so much the eldest, that when Mr. Daintree had met her and married her in Rome during one of his brief holidays, the two remaining sisters had been at the time hardly more than children. Colonel Nevill, their father, had married an Italian lady, long since dead ; and had lived a nomad life ever since he had become a widower ; moving about chiefly between Nice, Rome, and Malta. Wherever pleasant society was to be found, there would Colone. Nevill and his daughters instinctively drift ; and year after year they became more and more enamoured of their foreign life, and less and less disposed to venture back to the chill fogs and cloudy skies of their native land,

Three years after Marion had left them, and gone away with her husband to his

English vicarage, Theodora, the second daughter, had at eighteen married an Italian prince, whose lineage was ancient, but whose acres were few ; and Colonel Nevill, dying rather suddenly almost immediately after, Vera, the youngest daughter, as was most natural, instantly found a home with Princess Marinari.

All this time Marion lived at Sutton-in-the-Wold, and saw none of them. She wept copiously at the news of her father's death, regretting bitterly her inability to receive his parting blessing ; but her little Minnie being born shortly after, her thoughts were fortunately diverted into a happier channel, and she suffered from her loss less keenly, and recovered from it more quickly, than had she had no separate life and no separate interests of her own to engross her. Still, being essentially affectionate and faithful, she clung to the memory of the two sisters now separated so entirely from her. For some years she and Theodora kept up a brisk correspondence. Marion's letters were

full of the sayings and doings of Tommy and Minnie, and Theodora's were full of nothing but Vera.

What Vera had looked like at her first ball ; how Prince this, and Marquis so-and-so had admired her ; how she had been smothered with bouquets and bonbons at Carnival time ; how she had sat to some world-famed artist, who had entreated to be allowed to put her face into his great picture, and how the house was literally besieged with her lovers. By all this, and much more in the same strain, Marion perceived that her young sister, whom she had last seen in all the raw unformed awkwardness of early girlhood, had developed somehow into a beautiful woman.

And there came photographs of Vera occasionally, fully confirming the glowing accounts Princess Marinari gave of her ; fantastic photographs, portraying her in strange and different ways. There was Vera looking out through clouds of her own dark hair, hanging loosely about her face ;

Vera as a Bacchante crowned with vine leaves, laughing saucily ; Vera draped as a *dévote*, with drooping eyes, and hands crossed meekly upon her bosom. Sometimes she would be in a ball-dress, with lace about her white shoulders ; sometimes muffled up in winter sables, her head covered with a fur cap. But always she was beautiful, always a young queen, even in these poor, fading photographs, that could give but a faint idea of her loveliness to those who knew her not.

"She must be very handsome," Eustace Daintree would say heartily, as his wife, with a little natural flush of pride, handed some picture of her young sister across the breakfast-table to him. "How I wish we could see her, she must be worth looking at, indeed. Mother, have you seen this last one of Vera ?"

"Beauty is a snare," the old lady would answer viciously, hardly deigning to glance at the lovely face ; "and your sister seems to me, Marion, to be dressed up like an actress,

most unlike my idea of a modest English girl."

Then Marion would take her treasure away with her up into her own room, out of the way of her mother-in-law's stern and repelling remarks.

But one day there came sad news to the vicarage at Sutton. Theodora, Princess Marinari, caught the Roman fever in its worst form, and after a few agonising letters and telegrams, that came so rapidly one upon the other that she had hardly time to realise the dreadful truth, Marion learnt that her sister was dead.

After that, the elder sister's English home became naturally the right and fitting place for Vera to come to. So she left her gay life and her lovers, her bright dresses and all that had hitherto seemed to her worth living for, and came back to her father's country and took up her abode in Eustace Daintree's quiet vicarage, where she became shortly her sister's idol and her sister's mother-in-law's mortal foe.

And then it was that the worthy clergyman came to discover, that to put three grown-up women into the same house and to expect them to live together in peace and amity, is about as foolhardy an experiment as to shut up a bull-dog, a parrot, and a tom-cat in a cupboard, and expect them to behave like so many lambs.

It is now rather more than a year since Vera Nevill came to live in her brother-in-law's house. Let me waste no further time, but introduce her to you at once.

The time of the year is October—the time of day is five o'clock. In the vicarage drawing-room the afternoon tea-table has just been set out, and the fire just lit, for it is chilly; but one of the long French windows leading into the garden, is still open, and through it Vera steps into the room.

There is a background of brown and yellow foliage behind her, across the garden, all aglow with the crimson light of the western sky, against which the outlines of

her figure, in its close-fitting dark dress, stand out clearly and distinctly. Vera has the figure, not of a sylph, but of a goddess; it is the absolute perfection of the female form. She is tall—very tall, and she carries her head a little proudly, like a young queen conscious of her own power.

She comes in with a certain slow and languid grace in her movements, and pauses for an instant by the hearth, holding out her hand, that is white and well-shaped, though perhaps a trifle too long-fingered, to the warmth.

The glow of the newly-lit fire flickers up over her face—her face, with its pure oval outlines, its delicate, regular features, and its dreamy eyes, that are neither blue nor grey, nor hazel, but something vague and indistinctly beautiful, entirely peculiar to themselves. Her hair, a soft dusky cloud, comes down low over her broad forehead, and is gathered up at the back in some strange and thoroughly un-English fashion that would not suit everyone, yet that somehow

makes a fitting crown to the stately young head it adorns.

"Tea, Vera?" says Marion, from behind the cups and saucers.

Old Mrs. Daintree sits darning socks, severely, by the fading light. There is a sound of distant whimpering from the shadowy corner behind the piano; it is Tommy in disgrace. Vera turns round; Marion's kind face looks troubled and distressed; the old lady compresses her lips firmly and savagely.

Vera takes the cup from her sister's hands, and putting it down again on the table, proceeds to cut a slice of bread from the loaf, and to spread it thickly with strawberry jam.

"Come here, Tommy, and have some of Auntie's bread and jam."

Out comes a small person, with a very swollen face and a very dirty pinafore, from the distant seclusion of the corner, and flies swiftly to Vera's sheltering arm.

Mrs. Daintree drops her work angrily into her lap.

“Vera, I must beg of you not to interfere with Tom; are you aware that he is in the corner by my orders?”

“Perfectly, Mrs. Daintree; and also that he was there before I went out, exactly three-quarters of an hour ago; there are limits to all human endurance.”

“I consider it extremely impertinent,” begins the old lady, nodding her head violently.

“Darling Vera,” pleads Marion, almost in tears; “perhaps you had better let him go back.”

“Tommy is quite good now,” says Vera, calmly passing her hand over the rough blonde head. Master Tommy’s mouth is full of bread and jam, and he looks supremely indifferent to the warfare that is being carried on on his account over his head.

His crime having been the surreptitious purloining of his grandmamma’s darning cotton, and the subsequent immersion of the same in the inkstand, Vera feels quite a

warm glow of approval towards the little culprit and his judiciously-planned piece of mischief.

"Vera, I *insist* upon that child being sent back into the corner!" exclaims Mrs. Daintree angrily, bringing her large fist heavily down upon her knee.

"The child has been over punished already," she answers, calmly, still administering the soothing solace of strawberry jam.

"Oh, Vera, *pray* keep the peace!" cries Marion, with clasped hands.

"Here, I am thankful to say, comes my son;" as a shadow passes the window, and Eustace's tall figure with the meekly stooping head comes in at the door. "Eustace, I beg that you will decide who is to be in authority in this house—your mother or this young lady. It is insufferable that every time I send the children into the corner Vera should call them out and give them cakes and jam."

Eustace Daintree looks helplessly from one to the other.

“ My dear mother—my dear girls—what is it all about? I am sure Vera does not mean—”

“ No, Vera only means to be kind, grand-mamma,” cries Marion, nervously; “ she is so fond of the children—”

“ Hold your tongue, Marion, and don't take your sister's part so shamelessly ! ”

Meanwhile Vera rises silently and pushes Tommy and all his enormities gently by the shoulders out of the room. Then she turns round and faces her foe.

“ Judge between us, Eustace ! ” the old lady is crying; “ am I to be defied and set at nought? are we all to bow down and worship Miss Vera, the most useless, lazy person in the house, who turns up her nose at honest men and prefers to live on charity, a burden to her relations? ”

“ Vera is no burden, only a great pleasure to me, my dear mother,” said the clergyman, holding out his hand to the girl.

“ Oh, grandmamma, how unkind you are,” says Marion, bursting into tears. But

Vera only laughs lazily and amusedly, she is so used to it all ! It does not disturb her.

“ Is she to be mistress here, I ask, or am I ? ” continues Mrs. Daintree, furiously.

“ Marion is the mistress here,” says Vera, boldly ; “ neither you nor I have any authority in her house or over her children.” And then the old lady gathers up her work and sails majestically from the room, followed by her weak, trembling daughter-in-law, bent on reconciliation, on cajolement, on laying herself down for her own sins, and her sister’s as well, before the avenging genius of her life.

The clergyman stands by the hearth with his head bent and his hands behind him. He sighs wearily.

Vera creeps up to him and lays her hand softly upon his coat sleeve.

“ I am a firebrand, am I not, Eustace ? ”

“ My dear, no, not that ; but if you could try a little to keep the peace ! ” He stayed the caressing hand within his own and looked at her tenderly. His face is a good one, but not

a handsome one; and, as he looks at his wife's young sister, it is softened into its best and kindest. Who can resist Vera, when she looks gentle and humble, with that rare light in her dark eyes?

"Vera, why don't you look like that at Mr. Gisburne?" he says, smiling.

"Oh, Eustace! am I indeed a burden to you, as your mother says?" she exclaims, evasively.

"No, no, my dear, but it seems hard for you here; a home of your own might be happier for you; and Gisburne is a good man."

"I don't like good men who are poor!" says Vera, with a little grimace.

Her brother-in-law looks shocked. "Why do you say such hard worldly things, Vera? You do not really mean them."

"Don't I? Eustace, look at me: do I look like a poor clergyman's wife? Do survey me dispassionately." She holds herself at arm's length from him, and looks comically up and down the length of her

grey skirts. “ Think of the yards and yards of stuff it takes to clothe me ; and should not a woman as tall as I am be always in velvet and point lace, Eustace ? What is the good of condemning myself to work-house sheeting for the rest of my days ? ”

Mr. Daintree looks at her admiringly ; he has learnt to love her ; this beautiful southern flower that has come to blossom in his home. Women will be hard enough on Vera through her life—men, never.

“ You have great gifts and great temptations, my child,” he says, solemnly. “ I pray that I may be enabled to do my duty to you. Do not say you do not like good men, Vera, it pains me to hear you say it.”

“ I like *one* good man, and his name is Eustace Daintree ! ” she answers, softly ; “ is not that a hopeful sign ? ”

“ You are a little flatterer, Vera,” he says, kissing her ; but though he is a middle-aged clergyman and her brother-in-law, he is by no means impervious to the flattery.”

Meanwhile, upstairs, Marion is humbling herself into the dust, at the footstool of her tyrant. Mrs. Daintree is very angry with Marion's sister, and Mr. Gisburne is also the text whereon she hangs her sermon.

"I wish her no harm, Marion; why should I? She is most impertinent to me, but of that I will not speak."

"Indeed, grandmamma, you do not understand Vera. I am sure she—"

"Oh yes, excuse me, my dear, I understand her perfectly—the impertinence to myself I waive—I hope I am a Christian, but I cannot forgive her for turning up her nose at Mr. Gisburne—a most excellent young man; what can a girl want more?"

"Dear Mrs. Daintree, does Vera look like a poor clergyman's wife?" said Marion, using unconsciously Vera's own arguments.

"Now, Marion, I have no patience with such folly! Whom do you suppose she is to wait for? We haven't got any Princes down at Sutton to marry her; and I say its a shame that she should go on living on her

friends, a girl without a penny ! when she might marry a respectable man, and have a home of her own."

And then even Marion said, that if Vera could be brought to like Mr. Gisburne, it might possibly be happier for her to marry him.

CHAPTER II.

KYNASTON HALL.

It seemed to be generally acknowledged by the Daintree family, that if Vera would only consent to yield to the solicitations of the Reverend Albert Gisburne, and transfer herself to Tripton Rectory for life, it would be the simplest and easiest solution of a good many difficult problems concerning her.

In point of fact, Vera Nevill was an incongruous element in the Daintree household. In that quiet humdrum country clergyman's life, she was as much out of her proper place as a bird of paradise in a chicken yard, or a Gloire de Dijon rose in a field of turnips.

It was not her beauty alone, but her whole previous life which unfitted her for the things amongst which she found herself suddenly transplanted. She was no young

unformed child, but a woman of the world, who had been courted and flattered and sought after ; who had learnt to hold her own, and to fight her battles single-handed, and who knew far more about the dangers and difficulties of life than did the simple-hearted brother-in-law, under whose charge she now found herself, or the timid, gentle sister who was so many years her senior.

But if she was cognisant of the world and its ways, Vera knew absolutely nothing about the life of an English vicarage. Sunday schools and mothers' meetings were enigmas to her ; clothing clubs and friendly societies, hopeless and uninteresting mysteries which she had no desire to solve. She had no place in the daily routine. What was she to do amongst it all ?

Vera did what was most pleasant and also most natural to her,—she did nothing. She was by habit and by culture essentially indolent. The southern blood she inherited, the life of the Italian fine lady she had led,

made her languid and fond of inaction. To lie late in bed, to sip chocolate, and open her letters before she rose ; to be dressed and re-dressed by a fashionable lady's maid ; to recline in luxurious carriages, and to listen lazily to the flattery and adulation that had surrounded her,—that had been Vera's life from morning till night ever since she grew up.

How, with such antecedents, was she to enter suddenly into all the activity of an English clergyman's home ? There were the schools, and the vestry meetings, and the sick and the destitute to be fretted after from Monday morning till Saturday night —Eustace and Marion hardly ever had a moment's respite or a leisure hour the whole week ; whilst Sunday, of course, was the hardest day's work of all.

But Vera could not turn her life into these things. She would not have known how to set about them, and assuredly she had no desire to try.

So she wandered about the garden in the

summer time, or sat dreamily by the fire in winter. She gathered flowers and decorated the rooms with them ; she spoilt the children, she quarrelled with their grandmother, but she did nothing else ; and the righteous soul of Eustace Daintree was disquieted within him on account of her. He felt that her life was wasted, and the responsibility of it seemed, to his over-sensitive conscience, to rest upon himself.

"The girl ought to be married," he would say to his wife, anxiously. "A husband and a home of her own is what she wants. If she were happily settled she would find occupation enough."

"I don't see whom she could marry, Eustace ; men are so scarce, and there are so many girls in the county."

"Well, she might have had Barry." Barry was a curate whom Vera had lately scorned, and who had, in consequence of the crushed condition of his affections, incontinently fled. "And then there is Gisburne. Why couldn't she marry Gisburne ? He is

quite a catch, and a good young man too."

"Yes, it is a pity; perhaps she may change her mind, and he will ask her again after Christmas; he told me as much."

"You must try and persuade her to think better of it by then, my dear. Now I must be off to old Abraham, and be sure you send round the port to Mary Williams; and you will find the list for the blanket club on my study table, love."

Her husband started on his morning rounds, and Marion, coming down into the drawing-room, found old Mrs. Daintree haranguing Vera on the same all-important topic.

"I am only speaking for your good, Vera; what other object could I have?" she was saying, as she dived into the huge basket of undarned socks on the floor before her, and extracted thereout a ragged specimen to be operated upon. "It is sheer obstinacy on your part that you will not accept such a good offer. And there was poor Mr. Barry,

a most worthy young man, and his second cousin a bishop, too, quite sure of a living, I should say."

"Another clergyman!" said Vera, with a soft laugh, just lifting up her hands and letting them fall down again upon her lap, with a little, half-foreign movement of impatience. "Are there, then, no other men but the clergy in this country?"

"And a very good thing if there were no others," glared the old lady, defiantly, over her spectacles.

"I do not like them," said Vera, simply.

"Not like them! Considering that I am the daughter, the widow, and the mother of clergymen, I consider that remark a deliberate insult to me!"

"Dear Mrs. Daintree, I am sure Vera never meant—" cried Marion, trembling for fear of a fresh battle.

"Don't interrupt me, Marion; you ought to have more proper pride than to stand by and hear the Church reviled."

"Vera only said she did not like them."

"No more I do, Marion," said Vera, stifling a yawn—"not when they are young; when they are old, like Eustace, they are far better; but when they are young they are all exactly alike—equally harmless when out of the pulpit, and equally wearisome when in it!"

A few moments of offended silence on the part of the elder lady, during which she tugs fiercely and savagely at the ragged sock in her hands—then she bursts forth again.

"You may scorn them as much as you like, but let me tell you that the life of a clergyman's wife—honoured, respected, and useful—is a more profitable one than the idle existence which you lead, utterly purposeless and lazy. You never do one single thing from morning till night."

"What shall I do? Shall I help you to darn Eustace's socks?" reaching at one of them out of the basket.

Mrs. Daintree wrenched it, angrily, from her hand.

"Good gracious! as if you could! What

a bungle it would be. Why, I never saw you with a piece of work in your hand in my life. I dare say you could not even thread a needle."

"I am quite sure I have never threaded one yet," laughed Vera, lazily. "I might try; but you see you won't let me be useful, so I had better resign myself to idleness." And then she rose and took her hat, and went out through the French window, out among the fallen yellow leaves, leaving the other women to discuss the vexed problem of her existence.

She discussed it to herself as she walked dreamily along under the trees in the lane beyond the garden, her head bent, and her eyes fixed upon the ground; she swung her hat idly in her hand, for it was warm for the time of year, and the gold-brown leaves fluttered down about her head and rustled under the dark, trailing skirts behind her.

About half-a-mile up the lane, beyond the vicarage, stood an old iron gateway leading

into a park. It was flanked by square red-brick columns, upon whose summits two stone griffins, "rampant," had looked each other in the face for the space of some two hundred years or so, peering grimly over the tops of the shields against which they stood on end, upon which all the family arms and quarterings of the Kynastons had become softly coated over by an indistinct veil of grey-green moss.

Vera turned in at this gate, nodding to the woman at the lodge within, who looked out for a minute at her as she passed. It was her daily walk, for Kynaston was uninhabited and empty, and any one was free to wander unreproved among its chestnut glades, or to stand and gossip to its ancient housekeeper in the great bare rooms of the deserted house.

Vera did so, often. The square, red-brick building, with its stone copings ; the terrace-walk before the windows ; the peacocks sunning themselves before the front door ; the fountain plashing sleepily in the stone basin ;

the statues down the square Italian garden—all had a certain fascination for her dreamy poetical nature. Then, turning in at the high narrow doorway, whose threshold Mrs. Eccles, the housekeeper, had long ago given her free leave to cross, she would stroll through the deserted rooms, touching the queer spindle-legged furniture with gentle reverent fingers; gazing absorbedly at the dark rows of family portraits, and speculating always to herself what they had been like, these dead and gone Kynastons, who had once lived and laughed, and sorrowed and died, in the now empty rooms; where nothing was left of them save those dim and faded portraits, and where the echo of her own footsteps was the only sound in the wilderness of the carpetless chambers where once they had reigned supreme.

She got to know them all at last by name—whole generations of them. There was Sir Ralph in armour, and Bridget, his wife, in a ruff and a farthingale; young Sir Maurice, who died in boyhood, and Sir

Penrhyn, his brother, in long love-locks and lace ruffles. A whole succession of Sir Martins and Sir Henrys ; then came the first Sir John, and his wife in powder and patches, with their fourteen children all in a row, whose elaborate marriages and family histories Vera, although assisted by Mrs. Eccles, who had them all at her fingers' ends, had considerable difficulty in clearly comprehending. It was a relief to be firmly landed with Sir Maurice, in a sad-coloured suit and full-bottomed wig, “the present baronet’s grandfather,” and, lastly, Sir John, “the present baronet’s father,” in a scarlet deputy-lieutenant’s uniform, with a cocked hat under his arm—by far the worst and most inartistic painting in the whole collection.

It was all wonderful and interesting to Vera. She elaborated whole romances to herself out of these portraits. She settled their loves and their temptations, heart-broken separations, and true lovers’ meetings between them. Each one had his or her history woven out of the slender materials

which Mrs. Eccles could give her of their real lives. Only one thing disappointed her, there was no portrait to represent Sir John. She would have liked to have seen what he was like, this man who was unmarried still, and who had never cared to live in the house of his fathers. She wondered what the mystery had been that kept him from it. She could not understand that a man should deliberately prefer dark, dirty, dingy London, which she had only once seen in passing from one station to the other on her way to Sutton, to a life in this quiet old-world red-brick house, with the rooks cawing among trees, and the long chestnut glades stretching away into the park, and all the venerable associations of those portraits of his ancestors. Some trouble, some sorrow, must have kept him away from it, she felt.

But she would not question Mrs. Eccles about him ; she encouraged her to talk of the dead and gone generations as much as she pleased, but of the man who was her master Vera would have thought it scarcely honour-

able to have spoken to his servant. Perhaps, too, she preferred her dreams. One day, idly opening the drawer of an old bureau in the little room which Mrs. Eccles always called religiously "My lady's morning room," Vera came upon a modern photograph that arrested her attention wonderfully.

It represented, however, nothing very remarkable ; only a broad-shouldered, good-looking young man, with an aquiline nose and a close-cropped head. On the reverse side of the card was written in pencil, "My son—for Mrs. Eccles." Lady Kynaston, she supposed, must therefore have sent it to the old housekeeper, and of course it was Sir John. Vera pushed it back again into the drawer with a little flush, as though she had been guilty of an indiscretion in looking at it, and she said no word of her discovery to the housekeeper. A day or two later she sought for it again in the same place, but it had been taken away.

But the face thus seen made an impression upon her. She did not forget it; and when

Sir John Kynaston's name was mentioned, she invested him with the living likeness of the photograph she had seen.

On this particular October morning that Vera strolled up idly to the old house, she did not feel inclined to wander among the deserted rooms ; the sunshine came down too pleasantly through the autumn leaves ; the air was too full of the lingering breath of the dying summer for her to care to go indoors. She paused a minute by the open window of the housekeeper's room, and called the old lady by name.

The room, however, was empty and she received no answer, so she wandered on to the terrace and leant over the stone parapet that looked over the gardens and the fountains, and the distant park beyond, and she thought of the photograph in the drawer.

And then and there, there came into Vera Nevill's mind a thought that, beginning with nothing more than an indistinct and idle fancy, ended in a set and determined purpose.

The thought was this :—

“ If Sir John Kynaston ever comes down here, I will marry him.”

She said it to herself, deliberately and calmly, without the slightest particle of hesitation or bashfulness. She told herself that what her relations were perpetually impressing upon her concerning the desirability of her marrying and making a home of her own, was perfectly just and true. It would undoubtedly be a good thing for her to marry ; her life was neither very pleasant nor very satisfactory to herself or to anyone else. She had never intended to end her days at Sutton Vicarage ; it had only been an intermediate condition of things. She had no vocation for visiting the poor, or for filling that useful but unexciting family office of maiden aunt ; and, moreover, she felt that with all their kindness to her, her brother-in-law and his wife ought not to be burdened with her support for longer than was necessary. As to turning governess, or companion, or lady help, there

was an incongruity in the idea that made it too ludicrous to contemplate even for an instant. There is no other way that a handsome and penniless woman can deliver her friends of the burden of her existence than by marriage.

Marriage decidedly was what Vera had to look to. She was in no way averse to the idea, only she intended to look at the subject from the most practical and matter-of-fact point of view.

She was not going to render herself wretched for life by rashly consenting to marry Mr. Gisburne, or any other equally unsuitable husband that her friends might choose to press upon her. Vera differed in one important respect from the vast majority of young ladies of the present day,—she had no vague and indistinct dreams as to what marriage might bring her. She knew exactly what she wanted from it. She wanted wealth and position, because she knew what they were and what life became without them ; and because she knew that

she was utterly unfitted to be the wife of anyone but a rich man.

And therefore it was that Vera looked from the square red house behind her over the wide gardens and broad lawns, and down the noble avenues that spread away into the distance, and said to herself, “This is what will suit me, to be mistress of a place like this ; I should love it dearly ; I should find real happiness and pleasure in the duties that such a position would bring me. If Sir John Kynaston comes here, it is he whom I will marry, and none other.”

As to what her feelings might be towards the man whom she thus proposed to marry, it cannot be said that Vera took them into consideration at all. She was not, indeed, aware whether or no she possessed any feelings; they had never incommoded her hitherto. Probably they had no existence. Such vague fancy as had been ever roused within her had been connected with a photograph seen once in a writing-table drawer. The photograph of Sir John Kynaston ! The reflection did

not influence her in the least, only she said to herself also, " If he is like his photograph, I should be sure to get on with him."

She was an odd mixture, this Vera. Ambitious, worldly-wise, mercenary even, if you will ; conscious of her own beauty, and determined to exact its full value ; and yet she was tender and affectionate, full of poetry and refinement, honest and true as her own fanciful name.

The secret of these strange contradictions is simply this. Vera has never loved. No one spark of divine fire has ever touched her soul or warmed the latent energies of her being. She has lived in the thick of the world, but love has passed her scathless. Her mind, her intellect, her brain, are all alive, and sharpened acutely ; her heart slumbers still. Happier for her, perhaps, had it never awakened.

She leant upon the stone parapet, supporting her chin upon her hand, dreaming her dreams. Her hat lay by her side, her long dark dress fell in straight heavy folds to

her feet. The yellow leaves fluttered about her, the peacocks strutted up and down, the gardeners in the distance were sweeping up the dead leaves on the lawns, but Vera stirred not ; one motionless, beautiful figure giving grace, and life, and harmony to the deserted scene.

* * * * *

Some one was passing along among the upper rooms of the house, followed by Mrs. Eccles, panting and exhausted.

“ I am sure, Sir John, I am quite ashamed that you should see the place so choked up with dust and lumber. If you had only let me have a day’s notice, instead of being took all of a sudden like, I’d have had the house tidied up a bit ; but what with not expecting to see any of the family, and my being old, and not so quick at the cleaning as I used to be—”

“ Never mind, Mrs. Eccles ; I had just as soon see it as it is. I only wanted to see if you could make three or four rooms tolerably habitable in case I thought of bringing my

horses down for a month or so. The stables, I find, are in good repair."

"Yes, Sir John, and so is the house; though the furniture is that old-fashioned, that it is hardly fit for you to use."

"Oh! it will do well enough; besides, I have not made up my mind at all. It is quite uncertain whether I shall come— Who is that?" stopping suddenly short before the window.

"That! Oh, bless me, Sir John, it's Miss Vera, from the vicarage. I hope you won't object to her being here; of course, she could not know you was back. I had given her leave to walk in the grounds."

"The vicarage? Has Mr. Daintree a daughter so old as that?"

"Oh law! no, Sir John. It is Mrs. Daintree's sister. She came from abroad to live with them last year. A very nice young lady, Sir John, is Miss Nevill, and seems lonely like, and it kind of cheers her up to come and see me and walk in the garden. I am sure I hope you won't take it amiss that I should have allowed her to come."

"Take it amiss—good gracious, no ! Pray let Miss—Miss Nevill, did you say ?—come as often as she likes. What about the cellars, Mrs. Eccles ? "

"I will get the key, Sir John." The housekeeper precedes him out of the room, but Sir John stands still by the window.

"What a picture," he says to himself below his breath ; "how well she looks there. She gives to the old place just the one thing it lacks—has always lacked ever since I have known it—the presence of a beautiful woman. Yes, Mrs. Eccles, I am coming." This last aloud, and he hastens downstairs.

Five minutes later, Sir John Kynaston says to his housekeeper,

"You need not scare that young lady away from the place by telling her I was here to-day and saw her. And you may get the rooms ready, Mrs. Eccles, and order anything that is wanted, and get in a couple of maids, for I have made up my mind to bring my horses down next month."

CHAPTER III.

FANNING DEAD ASHES.

“HAVE you heard of Sir John’s latest vagary, grandpapa? He is gone down to Kynaston to hunt—so there’s an end of him.”

“Humph! where did you hear that?”

“I’ve been lunching at Lady Kynaston’s.”

The speaker stood by the window of one of the large houses at Princes Gate, overlooking the Horticultural Gardens. She was a small, slight woman with fair pale features and a mass of soft yellow hair. She had a delicate complexion and very clear blue eyes. Altogether she was a pretty little woman. A stranger would have guessed her to be a girl barely out of her teens. Helen Romer was in reality five-and-twenty, and she had been a widow four years.

Of her brief married life few people could

speak with any certainty, although there were plenty of surmises and conjectures concerning it. All that was known was that Helen had lived with her grandfather till she was nineteen ; that one fine morning she had walked out of the house and had been married to a man whom her grandfather disapproved of, and to whom she had always professed perfect indifference. It was also known that eighteen months later, her husband, having rapidly wasted his existence by drink and other irregular courses, had died in miserable poverty ; and that Helen, not being able to set up a home of her own, upon her slender fortune of some five or six thousand pounds, had returned to her grandfather's house in Princes Gate, where she had lived ever since.

Why she had married William Romer, no one ever exactly knew—perhaps Helen herself least of anyone ; it certainly was not for love ; it could hardly have been from any worldly motive. Some people averred, and

possibly they were not far wrong, that she had done so out of pique because the man she loved did not want her.

However that might be, Mrs. Romer returned a widow, and not a very disconsolate one, to her grandfather's house.

It is certain that she would not have lived there could she have helped it. She did not love old Mr. Harlowe, neither did Mr. Harlowe love her. A sense of absolute duty to his dead daughter's child on the one side, a sense of absolute necessity on the other, kept the two together. Their natures were inharmonious. They kept up a form of affection and intimacy openly; in reality, they had not one single thought in common.

It is not too much to say that Mr. Harlowe positively disliked his granddaughter. He had, perhaps, good reason for it. Helen had been nothing but a trouble to him; he had not desired to bring up a young lady in his house, he had not wished for the society which her presence entailed, nor for the dissipations of London life

into which he was dragged more or less against his will. Added to which, Helen had not striven to please him in essential matters. She had married a gambling, drinking blackguard, whom he had forbidden to enter his doors; and now, when she might retrieve her position, and marry well and creditably, she refused to make the slightest effort to meet his views.

Helen's life was a mystery to all but herself. To the world, she was a pretty, lively little widow, with a good house to live in, and sufficient money of her own to spend to very good effect upon her back, with not a single duty of responsibility in her existence, and with no other occupation in life than to amuse herself. At her heart, Helen knew herself to be a soured and disappointed woman, who had desired one thing all her life, and who, having attained with great pains and toil that forbidden fruit which she had coveted, had found it turn, as such fruits too often do, to dust and ashes between her teeth. It was to have been

sweet as honeydew,—and behold it was nothing but bitterness !

She stood at the window looking out at the waning light of the November afternoon. She was handsomely dressed in dark-green velvet, with a heavy old-fashioned gold chain round her neck ; every now and then she looked at her watch, and a frown passed over her brow. The old man was bending over the fire behind her.

“ Gone to Kynaston, is he ? Humph ! that is your fault, you frightened him off.”

“ Did I set my cap at him so palpably then ? ” said Helen, with a short, hard laugh.

“ You know very well what I mean,” answered her grandfather sulkily. “ Set your cap ! No, you only do that to the men you know I don’t approve of, and who don’t want you.”

Helen winced a little. “ You put things very coarsely, grandpapa,” she said, and laughed again. “ I am sorry I have been unable to make love to Sir John Kynaston,

to please you. Is that what you wanted me to do?"

"I want you to look after a respectable husband, who can afford to keep you. What is the meaning of that perpetual going to Lady Kynaston's, then? And what have you dragged me up to town at this confounded time of the year for, if it wasn't for that? You have played your cards badly, as usual. You might have had him if you had chosen."

"I have never had the least intention of casting myself at Sir John's head!" said Helen, scornfully.

"You can cast yourself, as you call it, at that good-for-nothing young spendthrift's head, fast enough, if you choose it."

"I don't in the least know whom you mean," she said, shortly.

The old man chuckled. "Oh yes, you know well enough—the brother who spends his time racing and betting. You are a fool, Helen; he doesn't want you; and if he did, he couldn't afford to keep you."

" Suppose we leave Captain Kynaston's name out of the discussion, grandpapa," she said quietly, but her face flushed suddenly and her hands twisted themselves nervously in and out of her heavy chain. "Are you not going to your study this evening?"

" Oh yes, I'm going, fast enough. You want me out of the way, I suppose. Somebody coming to tea, eh? Oh yes, I'll clear out. I don't want to listen to your rubbish."

The old man gathered up his books and papers and shuffled out of the room, muttering to himself as he went.

The servant came in, bringing the lamp, replenished the fire and drew the curtains, shutting out the light of day.

" Any one to tea, ma'am? " he enquired respectfully.

" One gentleman—no one else. Bring up tea, when he comes."

" Very well, ma'am; " and the servant withdrew. Mrs. Romer paced impatiently

up and down the room, stopping again and again before the clock.

"Late again! A whole half-hour behind his time! It is insufferable that he should treat me like this. He would go quickly enough to see some new face—some fresh fancy that had attracted him."

She took out her watch and laid it on the table. "Let me see if he will come before the minute-hand touches the quarter; he *must* be here by then!"

She continued to pace steadily up and down the room. The clock ticked on, the minute-hand of the watch crept ever stealthily forward over the golden dial; now and then a passing vehicle without made her heart beat with sudden hope, and then sink down again with disappointment as the sound of the wheels went by and died away in the distance.

Suddenly she sank into an arm-chair, covering her face with her hands.

"Oh, what a fool—what a fool I am!" she exclaimed aloud. "Why have I not

strength of mind to go out before he comes, to show him that I don't care? Why, at least, can I not call up grandpapa, and pretend I had forgotten he was coming? That would be the best way to treat him; the way to show him that I am not the miserable slave he thinks me. Why can I, who know so well how to manage all other men, never manage the one man whose love I want? That horrid old man was right—he does not want me—he never did. Oh, if I only could be proud, and pretend I do not care! But I can't, I can't—there is always this miserable sickening pain at my heart for him, and he knows it. I have let him know it!"

A ring at the bell made her spring to her feet, whilst a glad flush suddenly covered her face.

In another minute the man she loved was in the room.

"Nearly three-quarters of an hour late!" she cried angrily, as he entered. "How shamefully you treat me!"

He stood in front of the fire, pulling off

his dogskin gloves : a broad-shouldered, handsome fellow, with an aquiline nose and a close-cropped head.

“ Am I late ? ” he said indifferently. “ I really did not know it. I have had fifty places to go to in as many minutes.”

“ Of course I shall forgive you if you have been so busy,” she said, softening at once. “ Maurice, darling, are you not going to kiss me ? ” She stood up by his side upon the hearth-rug, looking at him with all her heart in her eyes, whilst his were on the fire. She wound her arms round his neck, and drew his head down. He leant his cheek carelessly towards her lips, and she kissed him passionately ; and he—he was thinking of something else.

“ Poor little woman,” he said, almost with an effort recalling himself to the present ; he patted her cheek lightly and turned round to toss his gloves into his hat on the table behind him. “ How cold it has turned —aren’t you going to give me some tea ? ” And then he sat down on the further side of

the fire and stretched himself back in his arm-chair, throwing his arms up behind his head.

Helen rang the bell for the tea.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" she said poutingly.

Maurice Kynaston looked distressed.

"Upon my word, Helen, I am sure I don't know what you expect. I haven't heard any particular news. I saw you only yesterday, you know. I don't know what you want me to say."

Helen was silent. She knew very well what she wanted, she wanted him to say and do things that were impossible to him—to play the lover to her, to respond to her caresses, to look glad to see her.

Maurice was so tired of it all! tired alike of her reproaches and her caresses. The first irritated him, the second gave him no pleasure. There was no longer any attraction to him about her, her love was oppressive to him. He did not want it, he had never wanted it; only somehow she had laid it so

openly and freely at his feet, that it had seemed almost unmanly to him not to put forth his hand and take it. And now he was tired of his thraldom, sick of her endearments, satiated with her kisses. And what was it all to end in? He could not marry her, he would not have desired to do so had he been able; but as things were, there was no money to marry on on either side. At his heart Maurice Kynaston was glad of it, for he did not want her for a wife, and yet he feared that he was bound to her.

Man-like, he had no courage to break the chains that bound him, and yet to-night he had said to himself that he would make the effort—the state of his affairs furnished him with a sufficiently good pretext for broaching the subject.

“There is something I wanted to say to you,” he said, after the tea had been brought in and they were alone again. He sat forward in his chair and stroked his moustache nervously, not looking at her as he spoke.

Helen came and sat on the hearthrug

at his feet, resting her cheek caressingly against his knee.

“ What is it, Maurice ? ”

“ Well, it’s about myself. I have been awfully hard hit this last week at Newmarket, you know.”

“ Yes, so you told me. I am so sorry, darling.” But she did not care much, as long as he was with her and was kind to her—nothing else signified much to her.

“ Yes, but I am pretty well broke this time—I had to go to John again. He is an awfully good fellow, is old John ; he has paid everything up for me. But I’ve had to promise to give up racing, and now I’ve got to live on my pay.”

“ I could lend you fifty pounds.”

“ Fifty pounds ! pooh ! what nonsense ! What would be the good of fifty pounds to me ? ”

He said it rather ungraciously, perhaps, and her eyes filled with tears. When a man does not love a woman, her little childish offers of help do not touch him

as they would if he loved her. He would not have taken five thousand from her, yet he was angry with her for talking of fifty pounds.

“What I wanted to say to you, Helen, was that, of course, now I am so hard up it’s no good thinking of—of marrying—or anything of that kind; and don’t you think it would be happiest if you and I—I mean, wisest for us both—for you, of course, principally—”

“*What!*” She lifted her head sharply. She saw what he meant at once. A wild terror filled her heart. “You mean that you want to throw me over!” she said, breathlessly.

“My dear child, do be reasonable. Throw you over! of course not—but what is it all to lead to? How can we possibly marry? It was bad enough before, when I had my few hundreds a-year. But now even that is gone. A captain in a line regiment is not exactly in a position to marry. Why, I shall hardly be able to keep myself, far less

a wife too. I cannot drag you down to starvation, Helen ; it would not be right or honourable to continue to bind you to my broken fortunes."

She was standing up now before him, very white and very resolute.

" Why do you make so many excuses ? You want to be rid of me."

" My dear child, how unjust you are."

" Am I unjust ? Wait ! let me speak. How have we altered things ? Could you marry me any more before you lost this money ? You know you could not. Have we not always agreed to wait till better times ? Why cannot we go on waiting ? "

" It would not be fair to tie you."

He had not the courage to say, " I do not love you—money or no money, I do not wish to marry you." How indeed is a man who is a gentleman to say such a discourteous thing to a lady for whom he has once professed affection ? Maurice Kynaston, at all events, could not say so.

" It would not be fair to tie you ; it would

be better to let you be free : " that was all he could find to say. And then Helen burst forth impetuously,—

" I wish to be tied—I do not want to be free—I will not marry any other man on earth but you. Oh ! Maurice, my love, my darling ! " casting herself down again at his feet and clasping her arms wildly round him. " Whom else do I want but you—whom else have I ever loved ? You know I have always been yours—always—long ago, in the old days when you never even gave me a look, and I was so maddened with misery and despair that I did not care what became of me, when I married poor Willie, hardly knowing what I was doing, only because my life was so unbearable at home. And now that I have got you, do you think I will give you up ? And you love me—surely, surely, you *must* love me. You said so once, Maurice—tell me so again. You do love me, don't you ? "

What was a man to do ? Maurice moved uneasily under her embrace as though he

would withdraw her arms from about his neck.

"Of course, of course," he said, nervously; "of course, I am fond of you, and all that, but we can't marry upon less than nothing; you must know that as well as I do."

"No; but we can wait."

"What are we to wait for?" he said, irritably.

"Oh, a hundred things might happen—your brother might die."

"God forbid!" he said, pushing her from him, in earnest this time.

"Well, we will hope not that, perhaps; but grandpapa can't live for ever, and he ought to leave me all his money, and then we should be rich."

"It is horrible, waiting for dead people's shoes," said Maurice, with a little shudder; "besides, Mr. Harlowe is just as likely as not, to leave his money to a hospital, or to the British Museum, or the National Gallery—you could not count upon anything."

“ We could at all events wait and see.”

“ And be engaged all that time on the off-chance ? ” he said drearily ; “ that is a miserable prospect.”

“ Then you do wish to get rid of me ! ” she said, looking at him suspiciously ; “ you have seen some other woman.”

“ Pooh ! what a little fool you are ! ” He jumped up angrily from his chair, leaving her there upon the hearthrug. A woman makes a false move when she speaks of “ another woman,” to the man whose affection for her is on the wane. In the present instance the accusation was utterly without foundation. Many as were his self reproaches on her account, that one had never been amongst them. If he did not love her, neither had he the slightest fancy for any other woman. Her remark irritated him beyond measure ; it seemed to annul and wipe out the score of his own shortcomings towards her, and to make himself, not her, the injured one.

“ Women are the most irrational, the

most unjust, the most thoroughly pig-headed set of creatures on the face of the earth ! ” he burst forth angrily.

She saw her mistake by this time. She was no fool ; she was quick enough—sharp as a needle—where her love did not, as love invariably does, warp and blind her judgment.

“ I am sorry, Maurice,” she said humbly, “ I did not mean to doubt you, of course. Have you not said you love me ? Sit down again, please.”

He sat down only half appeased, looking glum and sulky. She felt that some concession on her part was necessary. She took his hand and stroked it softly. She knew so well that he did not love her, and yet she clung so desperately to the hope that she could win him back ; she would not own to herself even in the furthestmost recesses of her own heart, that his love was dead. She would not believe it ; to put it in words, to herself even, would have half killed her ; but still she was forced to ac-

knowledge that, unless she met him half-way, she might lose him altogether.

"I will tell you what I will do, Maurice," she said thoughtfully. "I will consent to let our engagement be in abeyance for the present; I will cease to write to you, unless I have anything particular to say, and I will not expect you to write to me; if people question us, we will deny any engagement between us—we will say that we are each of us free—but on one condition only, that you will promise me most solemnly, on your honour as a gentleman, that should either of us be left any money—should there be, say, a clear thousand a-year between us, within the next five years—"

"My dear Helen, I am as likely to have a thousand a-year as to be presented with the regalia."

"Never mind; if it is unlikely, so much the worse—or the better, whichever you may like to call it. But if such a thing does happen, give me your word of honour that

you will come to me at once—that, in fact, our engagement shall be renewed. If things are no better, our prospects no brighter, in five years from now—well, then, let us each be free to marry elsewhere."

There was a moment or two of silence between them. Maurice bent forward in his chair, leaning his arms upon his knees, and staring moodily into the fire. He was weighing her proposition ; it was something ; but it was not enough. It virtually bound him to her for five years, for, of course, an engagement that is to be tacitly consented to between the principal contractors is an engagement still, though the whole world be in ignorance of it. But then it gave him a chance, and a very good chance, too, of perfect liberty in five years' time. It was something, certainly, though, as he had wanted his freedom at once, it could hardly be said to be altogether satisfactory.

Helen knelt bolt upright in front of him, watching his face. How passionately she desired to hear him indignantly repudiate

the half-liberty she offered him ; how ardently she desired that he should take her in his arms and swear to her that he would never consent to her terms, no one but herself could know. It had been her last expedient to revive the old love, to rekindle the dead ashes of the smouldering fire. Surely, if there was but a spark of it left, it must leap up into life and vitality again at her words. But, as she watched him, her heart, that had beat so wildly, sank cold and colder within her. She felt that his heart was gone from her ; she had cast her last die and lost. But, for all that, she was not minded to let him go free—her wild, ungoverned passion for him was too deeply rooted within her ; since he would not be hers willingly, he should be hers by force.

“ Surely,” she said, wistfully, “ you cannot find my terms too hard to consent to — you who—who love me ? ”

He turned to her quickly and took her hands, every feeling of gentlemanlike

honour, every spark of manly courtesy towards her, aroused by her gentle words.

“ Say no more, Helen—you are too good—too generous to me; it shall be as you say.”

And then he left, thankful to escape from her presence and to be alone again with his thoughts in the raw darkness of the November evening.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAY RECTOR.

IN the churchyard at Sutton-in-the-Wold was a monument, which, for downright ugliness and bad taste, could hardly find its fellow in the whole county. It was a wonderful and marvellous structure of grey granite, raised upon a flight of steps, and consisted of an object like unto Cleopatra's Needle surmounting a family tea-urn. It had been erected by one Nathaniel Crupps, a well-to-do farmer in the parish, upon the death of his second wife. The first partner of his affections had been previously interred also in the same spot, but it was not until the death of the second Mrs. Crupps, who was undoubtedly his favourite, that Nathaniel bethought him of immortalizing the memory of both ladies by one bold stroke of fancy, as exemplified by this

portentous granite monstrosity. On it the virtues of both wives were recorded, as it was touchingly and naively stated, by their "sorrowing husband with strict impartiality."

It was upon this graceful structure that Vera Nevill leant one foggy morning in the first week of November, and surveyed the church in front of her. She was not engaged in any sentimental musings appropriate to the situation. She was neither meditating upon the brevity of life in general, nor upon the many virtues of the ladies of the Crupps family, over whose remains she was standing. She was simply waiting for Jimmy Griffiths, and looking at the church because she had nothing else to look at. The church, indeed, afforded her some food for reflection, purely, I regret to state, of a practical and mundane character. It was a large and handsome building, with a particularly fine old tower, that was sadly out of repair; but the chancel was a modern and barn-like

structure of brick and plaster, which ought, of course, to be entirely swept away, and a new and more appropriate one built in its stead. The chancel belonged, as most chancels do, to the lay rector, and the lay rector was Sir John Kynaston.

As soon as it became bruited abroad that Sir John was coming down to the old house for the winter, there was a general excitement throughout the parish, but no one partook of the excitement to a greater degree than did its worthy vicar.

It was the dream of Eustace Daintree's life to get his church restored, and more especially to get the chancel rebuilt. There had been a restoration fund accumulating for some years, and could he have had the slightest assistance from the lay rector concerning the chancel, Mr. Daintree would assuredly have sent for the architect, and the builders, and the stone-cutters, and have begun his church at once, with that beautiful disregard of the future chances of being able to get the money to pay for it,

and with that sparrow-like trust in Providence, which is usually displayed by those clerical gentlemen who, in the face of an estimate which tells them that eight thousand pounds will be the sum total required, are ready to dash into bricks and mortar upon the actual possession of eight hundred. But there was the chancel ! To leave it as it was, whilst restoring the nave, would have been too heartrending ; to touch it without Sir John Kynaston's assistance, impossible and illegal. Several times Eustace Daintree had applied to Sir John in writing upon the subject. The answers had been vague and unsatisfactory. He would promise nothing at all ; he would come down and see it some day, possibly, and then he would be able to say more about it ; meanwhile, for the present, things must remain as they were.

When, therefore, the news was known that Sir John was actually coming down, Mr. Daintree's thoughts flew at once to his beloved church.

"Now we shall get the chancel done at last," he said to his wife gleefully, rubbing his hands. And the very day after Sir John's arrival, Eustace went up to the hall after dinner to see him upon the subject.

"Had you not better wait a day or two?" counselled his more prudent wife. "Wait till you meet him, naturally. You don't very well know what kind of man he is, nor how he will take it."

"What is the use of waiting? I knew him well enough eight years ago; he was a pleasant fellow enough then. He won't kill me, I suppose, and the chancel is a disgrace—a positive disgrace to him. It is my duty to point it out to him; the thing can't afford to wait, it ought to be done at once."

So he disregarded Marion's advice, and Vera helped him on with his great-coat in the hall, and wound his woollen comforter round his neck, and bade him good luck on his expedition to Kynaston.

He came back sorrowful and abashed.

Sir John had been civil, very civil ; he had insisted on his sitting down at his table—for he had apparently not finished his dinner—and had opened a bottle of fine old port in his honour. He had enquired about many of the old people, and had expressed a friendly interest in the parish generally ; but with regard to the chancel, he had been as adamant.

He did not see, he had said, why it could not go on well enough as it was. If it was in bad repair, Davis should see to it ; a man with a barrowful of bricks and a shovelful of mortar should be sent down. That, of course, it was his duty to do. Sir John did not understand that more could possibly be expected of him. The chancel had been good enough for his father, it would probably be good enough for him ; it would last his time, he supposed, in any case.

But the soul of the Rev. Eustace became as water within him. It was not of a barrowful of bricks and a shovelful of mortar that he had been dreaming, but of lancet

windows and stone mouldings ; of polished oak rafters within, and of high gables and red tiles without.

He came down from the Hall disheartened and discomfited, with all the spirit crushed out of him ; and the ladies of his family, for once, were of one mind about the matter. There arose about him a storm of indignation and a gush of sympathy, which could not fail to soothe him somewhat. Eustace went to rest that night sore and heavy-hearted, it is true, but with all the damning verses in the Scriptures concerning the latter end of the “ rich man ” ringing in his head ; a course of meditation which, upon the whole, afforded him a distinct sensation of consolation and comfort.

And the next morning in the churchyard Vera leant against the Cruppsian sarcophagus, and thought about it.

“ Poor old Eustace,” she said to herself ; “ how I wish I were very rich, and could do his chancel for him ! How pleased he would be ; and what a good fellow he is ! How odd

it is to think what different aims there are in people's lives ! There are Eustace and Marion simply miserable this morning because of that hideous barn they can't get rid of. Well, it *is* hideous, certainly ; but it doesn't disturb my peace of mind in the least. What a mean curmudgeon Sir John must be, by the way ! I should not have thought it, from his photograph ; such a frank, open, generous face he seemed to have. However, we all know how photographs can mislead one. I wonder where that wretched boy can be!"

The "wretched boy" was Jimmy Griffiths afore-mentioned ; he was the youth who was in the habit of blowing the organ. The schoolmaster, who was also the organist, was ill, and had sent word to Mr. Daintree that he would be unable to be at the church on the morrow. Eustace had asked Vera to take his place. Now Vera was not accomplished ; she neither sang, nor played, nor painted in water-colours ; but she had once learnt to play the organ a little—a very

little. So she professed herself willing to undertake the office of organ-player for once, that is to say, if she found she could do it pretty well, only she must go into church and try all the chants over. So Jimmy Griffiths was sent for from the village, and Vera, with the church key in her pocket, strolled idly into the churchyard, and, whilst awaiting him, meditated upon the tomb of the two Mrs. Crupps.

She had come in from the private gate of the vicarage, and the vicarage garden—very bleak and very desolate by this time—lay behind her. To the right, the public pathway led down through the lych-gate into the village. Anybody coming up from the village could have seen her as she stood against the granite monument. She wore a long fur cloak down almost to her feet, and a round fur cap upon her head; they were her sister Theodora's sables, which she had left to her. Old Mrs. Daintree always told her she ought to sell them, a remark which made Vera very angry. Her back was

turned to the village and to the lych-gate, and she was looking up at poor Eustace's bug-bear—the barn-like chancel.

Suddenly somebody came up close behind her, and spoke to her.

"Can you tell me, please, where the keys of the church are kept?"

A gentleman stood beside her, lifting his hat as he spoke. Vera started a little at being so suddenly spoken to, but answered quite quietly and unconfusedly,

"They are generally kept at the vicarage, or else in the clerk's cottage."

"Thank you; then I will go and fetch them."

"But they are not there now," said Vera, as though finishing her former remark.

"If you will kindly tell me where I can find them," continued the stranger, very politely, "I will go and get them."

"I am afraid you can't do that," said Vera, with just the vestige of a smile playing upon her face; "because they are at present in my pocket."

"Oh, I beg your pardon;" and the stranger smiled outright.

"But I will let you into the church, if you like; if that is what you wish?" she said, quite simply.

"Yes, if you please." Vera moved up the path to the porch, the gentleman following her. She turned the key in the heavy door and held it open. "If you will go in, please, I will take the keys; I must not leave them in the door." The gentleman went in and Vera looked at him as he passed by.

Most uninteresting! was her verdict as he passed her; forty at the very least! What a beautiful situation for an adventure! What a romantic incident! And how excessively tame is the *dénouement*! A middle-aged gentleman, tall and slightly bald, with close-cropped whiskers and grave, set features; who on earth could he be? A stranger, evidently; perhaps he was staying at some neighbouring country house, and had walked over to Sutton for the sake of exercise; but what

on earth could he want to see the church for !

The stranger stood just inside the door with his hat off, looking at her.

“ Won’t you come in and show it to me ? ” he asked, rather hesitatingly.

“ The church ? oh, certainly, if you like, but there is nothing to see in it.” She came in, closing the door behind her, and stood beside him. It did not strike her as unusual or interesting, or as anything, in fact, but the most common-place and unexciting proceeding, that she should do the honours of the church to this middle-aged stranger.

They stood side by side in the centre of the small nave with all the ugly, high, red-cushioned pews around them. Vera looked up and down the familiar place as though she and not he were seeing it for the first time ; from the row of whitewashed pillars to the staring white windows ; from the hatchment on the plastered walls to the disfiguring gallery along the west end.

“ It is very hideous,” she said, almost

apologetically, "especially the chancel ; Mr. Daintree wants to have it restored, but I suppose that can't be done at all now."

" Why can't it be done ? "

" Oh, because nothing can be done unless the chancel is pulled down ; that belongs to the lay rector, and he has refused to restore it."

" Sir John Kynaston is the lay rector."

" Yes !" Vera looked a little startled ; " do you know him ? "

The gentleman passed his hand over his chin.

" Slightly," he answered, not looking at her.

" It is a pity he cannot be brought to see how necessary it is, for he certainly ought to do it," continued Vera. " You see I cannot help being interested in it, because Mr. Daintree is such a good man, and has worked so hard to get up money to begin the rest of the church. He had quite counted upon the chancel being done, and now he is so

much disappointed ; but, I beg your pardon, this cannot interest you."

" But it interests me very much. Why does not somebody put it in this light to Sir John ; he would not surely refuse ? "

" My brother-in-law, Mr. Daintree, I mean, did ask him last night, and he would not promise to do anything."

The stranger suddenly left her side and walked up the church by himself into the chancel. He went straight up to the east end and made a minute examination, apparently, of the wall ; after that, he came slowly down again, looking carefully into every corner and cranny from the whitewashed ceiling down to the damp and uneven stone paving at his feet ; Vera thought him a very odd person, and wondered what he was thinking about.

He came back to her and stood before her looking at her for a minute. And then he made this most remarkable speech :

" If *you* were to ask Sir John Kynaston this he would restore the chancel ! " he said.

For half-a-second Vera stared at him in blank amazement. Then she turned haughtily round, and flushed hotly with angry indignation.

"There is nothing more to see in the church," she said, shortly, and walked straight out of it.

The stranger had followed her; when they reached the churchyard he said to her, quite humbly,

"I beg your pardon, Miss Nevill; how unlucky I am to have made you angry, to begin with."

Vera looked at him in astonishment. How did he know her name; who was he? He was looking at her with such a penitent and distressed expression, that for the first time she noticed what a kind face it was. Then, before she could answer him, she saw her brother-in-law over the paling of the vicarage garden, coming towards them.

The stranger saw him, too, and lifted his hat to her.

"Good-bye," he said, rather hastily; "I

did not mean to offend you ; don't be angry about it ;" and, before she could say a word, he turned quickly down the churchyard through the lych-gate into the road, and was gone.

"Vera," said Eustace Daintree, coming leisurely up to her through the garden gate, "how on earth do you come to be talking to Sir John ; has he been saying anything to you about the chancel ?"

"Who was it ? who did you say ?" cried Vera, aghast.

"Why, Sir John Kynaston, to be sure. Did you not know it was him ?"

She was thunderstruck. "Are you quite sure ?" she faltered.

"Why, of course ! I saw him only last night, you know. I wonder why he went off in such a hurry when he saw me ?"

Vera was walking silently down the garden towards the house, by his side. The thought in her mind was, "If that was Sir John Kynaston, who then is the photograph I found in the writing-table drawer ?"

“ What did he say to you, Vera ? How came you to be talking to him ? ” pursued her brother-in-law.

“ I only let him into the church. I did not know who he was. I told him the chancel ought to be restored—by himself.”

Eustace Daintree looked dismayed.

“ How very unfortunate. It will, perhaps, make him still more decided to do nothing.”

Vera smiled a little to herself. “ I hope not, Eustace,” was all she said. But although she said no word of it to him, she knew at her heart that his chancel would be restored for him.

Late that night Vera sat alone by her fireside and thought over her morning’s adventure ; and once again she said to herself with a little regretful sigh, “ Who, then, was the photograph ? ” But she put the thought away from her.

After all, she said to herself, it made no difference. He was still Sir John Kynaston of Kynaston Hall, and just as well worth a

woman's while to marry. She had made some mistake, that was all, and the real Sir John was not the least romantic or interesting to look at, but Kynaston Hall belonged to him all the same.

They were not very exalted or very much to be admired, these dreams of Vera's girlhood. But neither were they quite so coarse and unlovely as would have been those of a purely mercenary woman. She was free from the vulgarity of desiring the man's money and his name from any desire to raise herself above her relations, or to feed her own vanity and ambition at their expense. It was only, that marriage being a necessity for her, to marry anything but a rich man would have been, with her tastes and the habits to which she had been brought up, the sheerest and rankest folly. She thought she could make a good wife to any man whose life she would like to share; that is to say, a life of ease and affluence. She knew she would make a very bad wife to a poor man. Therefore she determined upon so

carving out her own fortunes that she should not make a failure of herself. It was worldly wisdom of the purest and simplest character.

She was as much determined as ever upon winning Kynaston's owner, if he was to be won. Only she wished, with a little sigh, that he had happened to be the man in the photograph. She hardly knew why she wished it—but the wish was there.

She sat bending over her fire, with all her soft, dark hair loose about her face and flowing down her back, and her eyes fixed dreamily upon the flames. Her past life came back to her, her old life in the whirl and turmoil of pleasure which had suited her so well. She compared it a little drearily with the present; with the hum-drum routine of the vicarage; with the parish talk about the old women and the schools, and the small tittle-tattle about the schoolmaster and the choir, going on around her all day; with old Mrs. Daintree's sharp tongue and her sister's meek rejoinders. She

was very tired of it. It did not amuse her. She was not exactly discontented with her lot; Eustace and her sister were very kind to her, and she loved them dearly, but she did not live their life—she was with them, but not of them. As for herself, for her interests and her delights, they stagnated amongst them all. How long was it to last?

And Kynaston, by contrast, appeared very fair, with its smooth lawns and its terrace walks, and its great desolate rooms that she would so well understand how to fill with life and brightness ; but Kynaston's master counted for very little to her. She knew the power of her own beauty so well. Experience had taught her that Vera Nevill had but to smile and to win ; it had been so easy to her to be loved and wooed.

“ Only,” she said to herself, as she stood up before her fire and stretched up her arms so that her long hair fell back like a cloud around her, “ only he is a different sort of man to what I had pictured him. It will,

perhaps, not be such an easy matter to win a man like that."

She went to bed and dreamt—not of Sir John Kynaston, but of the man whose pictured face once seen had haunted her ever since.

CHAPTER V.

“LITTLE PITCHERS.”

It was an easier matter to win him than Vera thought.

A week later Sir John Kynaston sat alone by his library fire, after breakfast, and owned to himself that he had fallen hopelessly and helplessly in love with Vera Nevill.

This was all the more remarkable because Sir John was not a very young man, and that he was, moreover, not of a nature to do things rashly or impulsively.

He was, on the contrary, of a slow and hesitating disposition. He was in the habit of weighing his words and his actions before he spoke or acted, his mind was tardy to take in new thoughts and new ideas, and he was cautious and almost sluggish in taking any steps in a strange and unaccustomed direction.

Nevertheless, in this matter of Vera, he had succumbed to his fate with all the uncalculating blindness of a boy in his teens.

Vera was like no other woman he had ever seen ; she was as far removed above common young-ladyhood as Raphael's Madonnas are beyond and above Greuze's simpering maidens ; there could be no other like her—she was a queen, a goddess among women.

From the very first moment that he had caught sight of her on the terrace outside his house, her absolute mastery over him had begun. Her rare beauty, her quiet smile, her slow, indolent movements, the very tones of her rich, low voice, all impressed him in a strange and wonderful manner. She seemed to him to be the incarnation of everything that was pure and elevated in womanhood. To have imagined that such a one as she could have thought of his wealth or his position, would have been the rankest blasphemy in his eyes.

He raised her up on a pedestal of his own creating ; and then he fell down before her and adored her.

John Kynaston had but little knowledge of women. Shy and retiring in manner—somewhat suspicious and distrustful also—he had kept out of their way through life. Once, in very early manhood, he had been deceived ; he had become engaged to a girl whom he afterwards discovered to have accepted him only for his money and his name, whilst her heart really belonged to another and a poorer man. He had shaken himself free of her, with horror and disgust, and had sworn to himself that he would never be so betrayed again. Since then he had been suspicious—and not without just cause—of the young ladies who had smiled upon him, and of their mothers, who had pressed him with gracious invitations to their houses. He was a rich man, but he did not mean to be loved for his wealth ; he said to himself that, sooner than be so, he would die unmarried and leave to

Maurice the task of keeping up the old name and the old family.

But he had seen Vera ; and all at once all the old barriers of pride and reserve were broken down ! Here was the one woman on earth who realised his dreams, the one woman whom he would wait and toil for, even as Jacob waited and toiled for Leah !

He had come down to Kynaston to hunt ; but hitherto hunting had been very little in his thoughts. He had been down to the vicarage once or twice, he had met her once in the lanes, and he had longed for a glimpse of her daily ; as yet, he had done nothing else. He opened his letters on this particular morning slowly and abstractedly, tossing them into the fire, one after the other, as he read them, and not paying very much attention to their contents.

There was one, however, from his brother. “ I wish you would ask me down to Kynaston for a week or two, old fellow,” wrote Maurice. “ I know you would mount me—now I have got rid of all my horses to please you—and



I should like a glimpse of the old country.
Write and tell me if I shall come down on
Monday."

This letter Sir John did pay attention to.
He rose hastily, as though not a moment
was to be lost, and answered it :—

" Dear Maurice,—I can't possibly have
you down here yet. My own plans are very
uncertain, and if you are going to take
your leave after Christmas, you had far
better not go away from your work now. If
I am still here in January I shall be delighted
if you will come down, and will mount you
as much as you like."

He was happier when he had written and
directed this letter.

" I must be alone just now," he murmured.
" I could not bear Maurice's chatter—it
would jar upon me."

Then he put on his hat and strolled out.
He looked in at the stables one minute, and
called the head groom to him.

" Wright, did not Mr. Beavan say, when
I bought that new bay mare of him, that she
had carried a lady to hounds ? "

"Yes, Sir John; Miss Beavan rode her last season."

"Ah, she is a good rider. Well, I wish you would put a side-saddle and a skirt on her, and exercise her this morning. I might want to—to lend her to a lady; but she must be perfectly quiet. You can take her out every day this week."

Sir John went on his way, leaving the worthy Wright a prey to speculation as to who the mysterious lady might be for whom the bay mare was to be exercised.

His master, meanwhile, bent his steps almost instinctively to the vicarage.

Vera was undergoing a periodical persecution, concerning Mr. Gisburne, at the hands of old Mrs. Daintree. She was standing up by the table, arranging some scarlet berries and some long trails of ivy, which the children had brought to her, in a vase. Tommy and Minnie stood by watching her intently; Mrs. Daintree sat at a little distance, her lap full of undarned socks, and rated her.

"It is not as if you were a girl who could earn her living in case of need. There is not one single thing you can do."

"Aunt Vera can make nosegays of berries boofully, grandma," interpolates Tommy, earnestly; "can't she, Minnie?"

"Yes, she do," assented the smaller child, with emphasis.

"I wasn't speaking to you, Tom; little boys should be—"

"Heard and not seen," puts in Tommy, rapidly; "you always say that, grandma!"

Vera laughs softly. Mrs. Daintree goes on with her lecture.

"Many girls in your position are very accomplished; can teach the piano, and history, and the elements of Latin, but it seems to me you have been brought up in idleness."

"Idleness is not to be despised in its way," answers Vera, composedly. "Another bit of ivy, Tommy. What shall I do, Mrs. Daintree?" she continues, whilst her deft fingers wind the trailing greenery round

and round the glass stem of the vase.
“ Shall I go down to the village school and sit at the feet of Mr. Dee ? I have no doubt he could teach me a great many things I know nothing about.”

“ That is nonsense ; of course I don’t mean that you can educate yourself to any purpose now ; it is too late for that ; but you need not, at all events, turn up your nose at the blessings that Providence sets before you ; and I must say, that for a young woman deliberately to choose to remain a burden upon her friends, betokens an amount of servility and a lack of the spirit of independence, which I should not have supposed possible, even in you ! ”

“ What do you want me to do ? ” said Vera, without a sign of impatience. “ Shall I walk over to Tripton this afternoon, and make a low curtsey to Mr. Gisburne, and say to him very politely, ‘ Here is an idle and penniless young woman who would be very pleased to stop here and marry you ! ’ Would that be the way to do it, Mrs. Daintree ? ”

“No, no, *no!*” imperatively from Tommy, who was listening with rapidly crimsoning cheeks; “you shall *not* go and stop at Tripton, and tell Mr. Gisburne you will marry him!”

Vera laughed. “No, Tommy, I don’t think I will; not, that is to say, if you are a good boy. I think I can do something better than that with myself!” she added, softly, as if to herself. Mrs. Daintree caught the words.

“And *what* better, pray? What better chance are you ever likely to have? Let me tell you, bachelors who want penniless wives don’t grow on the blackberry-bushes down here! If you were not so selfish and so conceited, you would see where your duty to my son, who is supporting you, lay. You would see that to be married to an honest, upright man like Albert Gisburne, is a chance that most girls would catch at only too thankfully.”

The old lady had raised her voice; she spoke loud and angrily; she was rapidly

working herself into a passion. Tommy, accustomed to family rows, stood on the hearthrug, looking excitedly from his grandmother to his aunt. He was a precocious child ; he did not quite understand, and yet he understood partly. He knew that his grandmother was scolding Vera, and telling her she was to go away and marry Mr. Gisburne. That Vera should go away ! That, in itself, was sufficiently awful. Tommy adored Vera with all the intensity of his childish soul ; that she should go away from him to Mr. Gisburne seemed to him the most terrible visitation that could possibly happen. His little heart swelled within him ; the tears were very near his eyes.

At this very minute the door softly opened, and Sir John Kynaston, whose ring had been unheard in the commotion, was ushered in.

Tommy thought he saw a deliverer, specially sent in by Providence for the occasion. He made one spring at him and caught him round the legs, after the manner of enthusiastic small boys.

“ Please—please—don’t let grandmamma send aunt Vera away to Tripton to marry Mr. Gisburne ! He has red hair, and I hate him ; and aunt Vera doesn’t want to go, she wants to stop at home and do something better ! ”

A moment of utter confusion on all sides ; then Vera, crimson to the roots of her hair, stepped forward and held out her hand.

“ Little pitchers have long ears ! ” she said, laughing ; “ and Tommy is a very silly little boy.”

“ No, but aunt Vera, you said—you said,” cried the child. What further revelations he might have made were fortunately not destined to be known. His aunt placed her hand unceremoniously over his small, eager mouth, and hustled both children in some haste out of the room.

Meanwhile, Sir John, looking the picture of distress and embarrassment, had shaken hands with the old lady, and enquired if he could speak to her son.

“ Mr. Daintree is in his study ; I will take

you to him," she said, rising, and led him away out of the room. She looked at him sharply as she showed him into the study ; and it did come across her mind, " I wonder what you come so often for." Still, no thought of Vera entered into her head. Sir John was the great man of the place, the squire, the potentate in the hollow of whose hand lay Sutton-in-the-Wold and all its inhabitants, and Vera was a nobody in the old lady's eyes,—a waif, whose presence was of no account at all. Sir John was no more likely to notice her than any of the village girls ; except, indeed, that he would speak politely to her because she was Eustace's sister-in-law. Still, it did come across her mind to wonder what he came so often for.

Five minutes later the two gentlemen were seen going across the vicarage garden towards the church.

They remained there a very long time, more than half-an-hour. When they came back, Marion had finished her housekeeping

and was in the room busy cutting out unbleached calico into poor men's shirts, on the grand piano, an instrument which she maintained had been specially and originally called into existence for no other purpose. Mrs. Daintree still sat in her chimney-corner. Vera was at the writing-table with her back to the room, writing a letter.

The vicar came in with his face all aglow with excitement and delight ; his wife looked up at him quickly, she saw that something unusual, and of a pleasant character, had happened.

“ My dear Marion, we must both thank our good friend Sir John. I am happy to tell you that he has consented to restore the chancel.”

“ Oh, Sir John, how can we ever thank you enough ! ” cried Marion, coming forward breathlessly and pressing his hand in eager gratitude. Sir John looked as if he didn't want to be thanked, but he glanced towards the writing-table. Vera's back was turned ; she made no sign of having heard.

"I am sure I had given up all hopes of it altogether," continued the vicar. "You gave such an unqualified refusal when I spoke to you about it before, I never dreamt that you would be induced to change your mind."

"Some one—I mean—I thought it over—and—and it was presented to my notice—in another light," stammered Sir John, somewhat confusedly.

"And it is most kind, most generous of you to allow it to be done in my own way, according to the plans I had wished to follow."

"Oh, I am quite sure you will understand it much better than I am likely to do. Besides, I have no time to attend to it; it will suit me better to leave it entirely in your hands."

"Would you not like to see the plans Mr. Woodley drew for us last year?"

"Not now, I think, thank you; I must be going; another time, Mr. Daintree, I can't wait just now."

He was standing irresolute in the middle of the room. He looked again wistfully at Vera's back. Was it possible that she was not going to give him one word, one look, when surely she must know by whose influence he had been induced to consent to rebuild the chancel !

Almost in despair he moved to the door, and just as he reached it, when his hand was already on the handle, she looked up. Her eyes, all softened with pleasure and gratitude, nay, almost with tenderness, met his. He stopped suddenly short.

“ Miss Nevill, might I ask you to walk with me as far as the clerk's cottage ? I—I forget which it is ! ”

It was the lamest and most blundering excuse. Any six-year old child in the village could have pointed out the cottage to him. Mrs. Daintree looked up in astonishment. Vera blushed rosy red ; Eustace, man-like, saw nothing, and began eagerly,

“ I am walking that way myself ; we can go together— ” Suddenly his coat tails were

violently pulled from behind. "Quite impossible, Eustace, I want you at home for the next hour," says Marion, quietly standing by his side, with a look of utter innocence upon her face. The vicar, almost throttled by the violence of the assault upon his garments, perceived that, in some mysterious manner, he had said something he ought not to have said. He deemed it wisest to subside into silence.

Vera rose from the writing-table. "I will go and put my hat on," she said quietly, and left the room.

Three minutes later she and Sir John went out of the front door together.

"Well, that is the oddest fellow I ever came across in my life," said Eustace, fairly puzzled as soon as he was gone. "It is my belief," tapping his forehead significantly, "that he is a little touched *here*. I don't believe he quite knows what he is talking about. Why, the other night he would have nothing to say to the chancery, wouldn't even listen to me, cut me so short about it I really

couldn't venture to pursue the subject ; and here he comes, ten days later, all of his own accord, and proposes to do it exactly as it ought to be done, in the best and most expensive way—purbeck columns round the lancet windows, and all, Marion, just what I wanted; gives me absolute *carte blanche* about it. I only hope he won't take a fresh fancy into his head, and change his mind again."

"Perhaps he found he would make himself unpopular if he did not do it," suggested his mother.

Marion held her tongue, and snipped away at her unbleached calico.

"And then, again, about old Hoggs' cottage," pursued Mr. Daintree. "What on earth could make him forget where it was ? He might as well forget the way to his own house. I really do think he must be a little gone in the upper storey, poor fellow ! Marion, what have you to say about it ?"

"I have to say that if you stand chattering here all the morning, we shall never get

anything done. I want to speak to you immediately, Eustace, in the other room."

She hurried her husband out into the study, and carefully closed the door upon them.

What then was the Rev. Eustace's amazement to behold his wife suddenly execute a series of capers round the room, which would not have disgraced a *coryphée* at a Christmas pantomime, but were hardly in keeping with the demure and highly respectable bearing of the wife of the vicar of Sutton-in-the-Wold!

Mr. Daintree began to think that everybody was going mad this morning.

"My dear Marion, what on earth is the matter?"

"Oh, you dear, stupid, blunder-headed old donkey!" exclaimed his wife, finishing her *pas seul* in front of him, and hugging him vehemently as a finale to the entertainment. "Do you mean to say that you don't see it?"

“ See it ? See what ? ” repeated the unfortunate clergyman, in mortal bewilderment, staring at her hard.

“ Oh, you dear, stupid old goose ! why, it’s as plain as daylight. Can’t you guess ? ”

Eustace shook his head dolefully.

“ Why, Sir John Kynaston has fallen in love with Vera ! ”

“ *Marion !* impossible ! ” in an awe-struck whisper. “ What can make you imagine such a thing ? ”

“ Why, everything—the chancel, of course. She must have spoken to him about it ; it is to be done for her ; did you not see him look at her ? And then, asking her to go down the village with him ; he knows where Hoggs’ cottage is as well as you do, only he couldn’t think of anything better.”

Eustace literally gasped with the magnitude of the revelation.

“ Great Heavens ! and I offered to go with him instead of her.”

“ Yes, you great blundering baby ! ”

“ Oh, my dear, are you sure—are you quite sure? Remember his position and Vera’s.”

“ Well, and isn’t Vera good enough, and beautiful enough, for any position? ” answered her sister proudly.

“ Yes, yes; that is true; God bless her! ” he said fervently. “ Marion, what a clever woman you are to find it out.”

“ Of course I am clever, sir. But, Eustace, it is only beginning, you know; so we must just let things take their course, and not seem to notice anything. And, mind, not a word to your mother.”

Meanwhile Vera and Sir John Kynaston were walking down the village street together. The man awkward and ill at ease, the woman calm and composed, and thoroughly mistress of the occasion.

“ It is very good of you about the chancel,” said Vera softly, breaking the embarrassment of the silence between them.

“ You *knew* I should do it,” he said, looking at her

She smiled. "I thought perhaps you would."

"You know *why* I am going to do it—for whose sake, do you not?" he pursued, still keeping his eyes upon her downcast face.

"Because it is the right thing to do, I hope; and for the sake of doing good," she answered, sedately; and Sir John felt immediately reproved and rebuked, as though by the voice of an angelic being.

"Tell me," he said presently, "is it true that they want you to marry—that parson—Gisburne of Tripton? Forgive me for asking."

Vera coloured a little and laughed.

"What dreadful things little boys are!" was all she said.

"Nay, but I want to know. Are you—are you *engaged* to him?" with a sudden painful eagerness of manner.

"Most decidedly I am not," she answered earnestly.

Sir John breathed again.

"I don't know what you will think of me;

you will, perhaps, say I am very impertinent. I know I have no right to question you."

"I only think you are very kind to take an interest in me," she answered gently, looking at him with that wonderful look in her shadowy eyes, that came into them unconsciously when she felt her softest and her best.

They had passed through the village by this time, into the quiet lane beyond ; needless to say that no thought of Hoggs, the clerk, or his cottage, had come into either of their heads, by the way.

Sir John stopped short, and Vera of necessity stopped too.

"I thought—it seemed to me by what I overheard," he said, hesitatingly, "that they were tormenting you—persecuting you, perhaps—into a marriage you do not wish for."

"They have wished me to marry Mr. Gisburne," Vera admitted, in a low voice, rustling the fallen brown leaves with her foot, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"But you won't let them over-persuade

you ; you won't be induced to listen to them, will you ? Promise me you won't ?" he asked, anxiously.

Vera looked up frankly into his face, and smiled.

" I give you my word of honour I will not marry Mr. Gisburne," she answered ; and then she added laughingly, " You had no business to make me betray that poor man's secrets."

And then Sir John laughed too, and, changing the subject, asked her if she would like to ride a little bay mare he had that he thought would carry her. Vera said she would think of it, with the air of a young queen accepting a favour from a humble subject ; and Sir John thanked her as heartily as though she had promised him some great thing.

" Now, suppose we go and find Hoggs' cottage," she said, smiling. And they turned back towards the village.

CHAPTER VI.

A SOIRÉE AT WALPOLE LODGE.

ABOUT three miles from Hyde Park Corner, somewhere among the cross-roads between Mortlake and Kew, there stands a rambling, old-fashioned house, within about four acres of garden, surrounded by a very high, red-brick wall. It is one of those houses of which there used to be scores within the immediate neighbourhood of London —of which there still are dozens, although, alas ! they are yearly disappearing to make room for gay rows of pert, upstart villas, whose tawdry flashiness ill replaces the sedate respectability of their last-century predecessors. But, uncoveted by the contractor's lawless eye, untouched by the builder's desecrating hand, Walpole Lodge stands on, as it did a hundred years ago, hidden behind the shelter of its venerable walls, and half smothered under

masses of westeria and Virginia creeper. On the wall, in summer time, grow countless soft green mosses, and brown, waving grasses. Thick masses of yellow stonecrop, and tufts of snapdragon, crown its summit, whilst the topmost branches of the long row of lime-trees within, come nodding sweet scented greetings to the passers-by along the dusty high road below.

But in the winter the wall is flowerless and the branches of the lime-trees are bare, and within, in the garden, there are only the holly-trees and the yew-hedge of the shrubbery walks, and the empty brown flower-beds set in the faded grass. But winter and summer alike, old Lady Kynaston holds her weekly receptions, and thither flock all the wit, and the talent, and the fashion of London. In the summer they are garden parties, in the winter they become evening receptions. How she manages it no one can quite tell; but so it is, that her rooms are always crowded, that no one is ever bored

at her house, that people are always keen to come to her, and that there are hundreds who would think it an effort to go to other people's parties across the street, who think it no trouble at all to drive nearly to Richmond, to hers. She has the rare talent of making society a charm in itself. No one who is not clever, or beautiful, or distinguished in some way above his or her fellows, ever gains a footing in her drawing-rooms. Every one of any note whatever is sure to be found there. There are savants and diplomatists, poets and painters, foreign ambassadors, and men of science. The fashionable beauty is sure to be met there, side by side with the latest type of strong-minded woman; the German composer, with the wild hair, whose music is to regenerate the future, may be seen chatting to a cabinet minister; the most rising barrister of the day is lingering by the side of a prima-donna, or discoursing to an Eastern traveller. Old Lady Kynaston herself has charming manners, and possesses the rare tact of

making everyone feel at home and happy in her house.

It was not done in a day—this gathering about her of so brilliant and delightful a society. She had lived many years at Walpole Lodge, ever since her widowhood, and was now quite an old lady. In her early life she had written several charming books—chiefly biographies of distinguished men whom she had known, and even now she occasionally put pen again to paper and sent some delightful social essay or some pleasantly written critique to one or other of the *Reviews* of the day.

Her married life had been neither very long nor very happy. She had never learnt to love her husband's country home. At his death she had turned her back thankfully upon Kynaston, and had never seen it again. Of her two sons, she stood in some awe of the elder, whose cold and unresponsive character resembled her dead husband's, whilst she adored Maurice, who was warmhearted and affectionate in manner, like herself.

There were ten years between them, for she had been married twelve years ; and at her secret heart Lady Kynaston hoped and believed that John would remain unmarried, so that the estates and the money might in time become Maurice's.

It is the second Thursday in December, and Lady Kynaston is “at home” to the world. Her drawing-rooms—there are three of them, not large, but low, comfortable rooms, opening one out of the other—are filled, as usual, with a mixed and brilliant crowd.

Across the square hall is the dining-room, where a cold supper, not very sumptuous or very *recherché*, but still sufficient of its kind for the occasion, is laid out ; and beyond that is Lady Kynaston's boudoir, where there is a piano, and which is used on these occasions as a music-room, so that those who are musical may retire there and neither interfere, nor be interfered with by the conversation of the rest of the company. Some one is singing in the music-room now—

singing well, you may be sure, or he would not be at Walpole Lodge—but the strains of the song can hardly be heard at all across dining-room and hall, in the larger of the three rooms, where most of the guests are congregated.

Lady Kynaston, a small, slight woman in soft grey satin and old lace, moves about graciously and gracefully still, despite her seventy years, among her guests—stopping now at one group, now at another, talking politics to one, science to a second, whispering a few discreet words about the latest scandal to this great lady, murmuring words of approval upon her clever book or her charming poem to another. Her smiles are equally dispensed, no one is passed over, and she has the rare talent of making every single individual in the crowded room feel himself to be the one particular person whom Lady Kynaston is especially rejoiced to see. She has tact, and she has sympathy—two invaluable gifts in a woman.

Conspicuous among the crowd of well-

dressed and handsome women is Helen Romer. She sits on an ottoman at the further end of the room, where she holds a little court of her own, dispensing her smiles and pleasant words among the little knot of men who linger admiringly by her side.

She is in black, with masses of gold embroidery about her, and she carries a large black and gold feather fan in her hands, which she moves rapidly, almost restlessly, up and down; her eyes wander often to the doorway, and every now and then she raises her hand with a short, impatient action to her blonde head, as though she were half weary of the talk about her.

Presently, Lady Kynaston, moving slowly among her guests, comes near her, and, leaning for a moment on the back of the ottoman, presses her hand as she passes.

Mrs. Romer is a favourite of hers; she is pretty, and she is piquant in manner and conversation; two very good things, which she thinks highly of in any young woman. Besides that, she knows that Helen loves

her younger son ; and, although she hardly understands how things are between them, nor how far Maurice himself is implicated, she believes that Helen will eventually inherit her grandfather's money, and, liking her personally, she has seen no harm in encouraging her too plainly displayed affection. Moreover, the love they both bear to him has been a link between them. They talk of him together almost as a mother and a daughter might do ; they have the same anxieties over his health, the same vexations over his debts, the same rejoicings when his brother comes forward with his much-needed help. Lady Kynaston does not want her darling to marry yet, but when the time shall come for him to take unto himself a wife, she will raise no objection to pretty Helen Romer, should he bring her to her, as a daughter-in-law.

As the old lady stoops over her, Helen's upturned wistful eyes say as plainly as words can say it—

“ Is he coming to-night ? ”

“ Maurice will be here presently, I hope,” says his mother, answering the look in her eyes ; “ he was to come up by the six o’clock train ; he will dine at his club and come on here later.” Helen’s face became radiant, and Lady Kynaston passed on.

Maurice Kynaston’s regiment was quartered at Northampton ; he came up to town often for the day or for the night, as he could get leave ; but his movements were never quite to be depended upon.

Half-an-hour or so more of feverish impatience. Helen watches the gay crowd about her with a feeling of sick weariness. Two members of Parliament are talking of Russian aggression and Turkish misrule, close to her ; they turn to her presently and include her in the conversation ; Mrs. Romer gives her opinion shrewdly and sensibly. An elderly duchess is describing some episode of Royalty’s last ball ; there is a general laugh, in which Helen joins heartily, a young attaché bends over her and whispers some admiring little speech in her ear, and she

blushes and smiles just as if she liked it above all things ; while all the time her eyes hardly stray for one second from the open doorway through which Maurice will come, and her heart is saying to itself, over and over again,

“ Will he come, will he come ? ”

He comes at last. Long before the servant, who opens the door to him, has taken his coat and hat from him, Helen catches sight of his handsome head and his broad shoulders through an opening in the crowd. In another minute he is in the room standing irresolute in the doorway, looking round as if to see who is and who is not there to-night.

He is, after all, only a very ordinary type of a good-looking soldierly young Englishman, just such a one as may be seen any day in our parks or our drawing-rooms. He has clearly-cut, and rather *prononcé* features ; a strong-built, well-made figure ; a long moustache, close-shaven cheeks, and eyes that are rather deep set, and are, when you

are near enough to see them well, of a deep blue-grey. In all that, Maurice Kynaston is in no way different from scores of other good-looking young men whom we may have met. But there is just something that makes his face a remarkable one : it is a strong-looking face—a face that looks as if he had a will of his own and knew how to stick to it ; a face that looks, too, as if he could do and dare much for truth and honour's sake. It is almost stern when he is silent ; it can soften into the tenderness of a woman when he speaks.

Look at him now as he catches sight of his mother, and steps forward for a minute to press her loving hands. All the hardness and all the strength is gone out of his face now ; he only looks down at her with eyes full of love and gentleness,—for life, as yet, holds nothing dearer or better for him than that little white-haired old woman. Only for a minute, and then he leaves go of her hands, and passes on down the room, speaking to the guests whom he knows.

“ He does not see me,” says Helen, bitterly, to herself; “ he will go on into the next room, and never know that I am here.”

But he had seen her perfectly. Next to the woman he most wishes to see in a room, the one whom a man first catches sight of is the woman he would sooner were not there. He had seen Helen the very instant he came in, but he had noticed thankfully that some one was talking to her, and he said to himself that there was no occasion for him to hurry to her side; it was not as if they were openly engaged; there could be no necessity for him to rush into slavery at once; he would speak to her, of course, by-and-by; and whenever he came to her he well knew that he would be equally welcomed: he was so sure of her. Nothing on earth or under Heaven is so fatal to a man’s love as that. There was no longer any uncertainty; there was none of the keenness of pursuit dear to the old hunting instinct inherent in man; there was not even the charm of variety in her moods. She was always the same to

him ; always she pouted a little at first, and looked ill-tempered, and reproached him ; and always she came round again at his very first kind word, and poured out her heart in a torrent of worship at his feet. Maurice knew it all by heart, the sulks and the cross words, and then the passionate denials, and the wild protestations of her undying love. He was sorry for her, too, in his way ; he was too tender-hearted, too chivalrous, to be anything but kind to her ; but though he was sorry, he could not love her ; and, oh ! how insufferably weary of her he was !

Presently he did come up to her, and took the seat by her side, just vacated by the attaché. The little serio-comedy instantly repeated itself.

A little pout and a little toss of the head.

“ You have been as long coming to speak to me as you possibly could be.”

“ Do you think it would look well if I had come rushing up to you the instant I came in ?”

“ You need not, at all events, have stood

talking for ten minutes to that great black-eyed Lady Anderleigh. Of course, if you like her better than me, you can go back to her."

"Of course I can, if I choose, you silly little woman ; but seeing that I am by you, and not by her, I suppose it is a proof that I prefer your society, is it not ?"

Very polite, but not strictly true, Captain Maurice ! At his heart he preferred talking to Lady Anderleigh, or to any other woman in the room. The admission, however, was quite enough for Helen.

"Dear Maurice," she whispered, "forgive me ; I am a jealous, bad-tempered wretch, but," lower still, "it is only because I love you so much."

And had there been no one in the room, Maurice knew perfectly that at this juncture Mrs. Romer would have cast her arms around his neck—as usual.

To his unspeakable relief, a man—a clever lawyer, whose attention was a flattering

thing to any woman—came up to Helen at this moment, and took a vacant chair beside her. Maurice thankfully slipped away, leaving his inamorata in a state of rage and disgust with that talented and elderly lawyer, such as no words can describe.

Captain Kynaston took the favourable opportunity of escaping across the hall, where he spent the remainder of the evening, dividing his attention between the music and supper-rooms, and Helen saw him no more that night.

She saw, however, some one she had not reckoned upon seeing. Glancing carelessly across to the end of the room, she perceived, talking to Lady Kynaston, a little French gentleman, with a smooth black head, a neat, pointed, little black beard, and the red ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur in his buttonhole.

What there was in the sight of so harmless and inoffensive a personage to upset her, it may be difficult to say; but the fact is, that, when Mrs. Romer perceived this

polite little Frenchman talking to her hostess, she turned suddenly so sick and white, that a lady sitting near her asked her if she was going to faint.

“I feel it a little hot,” she murmured; “I think I will go into the next room.” She rose and attempted to escape—whether from the heat, or the observation of the little Frenchman, was best known to herself.

Her manœuvre, however, was not destined to succeed. Before she could work her way halfway through the crush to the door, the man whom she was bent upon avoiding turned round and saw her. A look of glad recognition flashed into his face, and he instantly left Lady Kynaston’s side, and came across the room to speak to her.

“This is an unlooked-for pleasure, madame.”

“I certainly never expected to meet you here, Monsieur D’Arblet,” faltered Helen, turning red and white alternately.

“ Will you not come and have a little conversation with me ? ”

“ I was just going away.”

“ So soon ! Oh, bien ! then I will take you to your carriage.” He held out his arm, and Helen was perforce obliged to take it.

There was a little delay in the hall, whilst Helen waited for her, or rather for her grandfather’s, carriage, during which she stood with her hand upon her unwelcome friend’s arm. Whilst they were waiting he whispered something eagerly in her ear.

“ No, no ; it is impossible ! ” reiterated Helen, with much apparent distress.

Monsieur D’Arblet whispered something more.

“ Very well, if you insist upon it ! ” she said, faintly, and then got into her carriage and was driven away.

Before, however, she had left Walpole Lodge five minutes, she called out to the servants to stop the carriage. The footman descended from the box and came round to the window.

They had drawn up by the side of a long wall, quite beyond the crowd of carriages that was waiting at Lady Kynaston's house.

“I want to wait here a few minutes, for—for a gentleman; I am going to drive back to town,” she said to the servant, confusedly. She was ashamed to give such an order to him.

She was frightened too, and trembled with nervousness lest any one should see her waiting here.

It was a cold, damp night, and Helen shivered, and drew her fur cloak closer about her in the darkness. Presently there came footsteps along the pathway, and a man came through the fog up to the door. It was opened for him in silence, and he got in, and the carriage drove off again.

Monsieur Le Vicomte D'Arblet had a mean, cunning-looking countenance; strictly speaking, indeed, he was rather handsome, his features being decidedly well-shaped, but the evil and vindictive expression of his face made it an unpleasant one to look

upon. As he took his seat in the brougham by Helen's side, she shrank instinctively away from him.

"So, ma mie!" he said, peering down into her face with odious familiarity, "here I find you again after all this time, beautiful as ever! It is charming to be with you again, once more."

"Monsieur D'Arblet, pray understand that nothing but absolute necessity would have induced me to drive you home to night," said Helen, who was trembling violently.

"You are not polite, ma belle—there is a charming *franchise* about you English-women, however, which gives a piquancy to your conversation."

"You know very well why it is that I am obliged to speak to you alone," she interrupted, colouring hotly under his bold looks of admiration.

"*Le souvenir du beau passé!*" murmured the Frenchman, laughing softly. "Is that it, ma belle Hélène?"

"Monsieur," she cried, almost in tears,

"pray listen to me; for pity's sake tell me what you have done with my letters—have you destroyed them?"

"Destroyed them? What, those dear letters that are so precious to my heart? Ah, madame, could you believe it of me?"

"You have kept them?" she murmured, faintly.

"Mais si, certainement, that I have kept them, every one—every single one of them," he repeated, looking at her meaningfully, with a cold glitter in his black eyes.

"Not that—that one?" pleaded Helen, piteously.

"Yes—that one too—that charming and delightful letter in which you so generously offered to throw yourself upon my protection—do you remember it?"

"Alas, only too well!" she murmured, hiding her face in her hands.

"Ah!" he continued, with a sort of relish in torturing her, which resembled the feline cruelty of a wild beast playing with its

prey. “Ah! it was a delightful letter, that; what a pity it was that I was out of Paris that night, and never received it till, alas! it was too late to rush to your side. You remember how it was, do you not? Your husband was lying ill at your hotel; you were very tired of him—ce pauvre mari! Well, you had been tired of him for some time, had you not? And he was not what you ladies call ‘nice;’ he did drink, and he did swear, and I had been often to see you when he was out, and had taken you to the theatre and the bal d’opéra—do you remember?”

“Ah, for Heaven’s sake spare me these horrible reminiscences!” cried Helen, despairingly.

He went on pitilessly, as though he had not heard her—

“And you were good enough to write me several letters—there were one, two, three, four of them,” counting them off upon his fingers; “and then came the fifth—that one you wrote when he was ill. Was it not

a sad pity that I had gone out of Paris for the day, and never received it till you and your husband had left for England ? But think you that I will part with it, ever ? It is my consolation, my trésor ! ”

“ Monsieur D’Arblet, if you have one spark of honour or of gentlemanlike feeling, you will give me those mad, foolish letters again. I entreat you to do so. You know that I was beside myself when I wrote them, I was so unhappy—do you not see that they compromise me fatally, that it is my good name, my reputation, which are at stake ? ” In her agony she had half sunk at his feet, on the floor of the carriage, clasping her hands entreatingly together.

Monsieur D’Arblet raised her with *empressement*.

“ Ah, madame, do not thus humiliate yourself at my feet. Why should you be afraid ? Are not your good name and your reputation safe in my hands ? ”

Helen burst into bitter tears.

“ How cruel, how wicked you are ! ” she

cried ; “ no Englishman would treat a lady in this way.”

“ Your Englishmen are fools, ma chère—and I—I am French ! ” he replied, shrugging his shoulders expressively.

“ But what object, what possible cause can you have for keeping those wretched letters ? ”

He bent his face down close to hers.

“ Shall I tell you, belle Hélène ? It is this : You are beautiful and you have talent ; I like you. Some day, perhaps, when the grandpapa dies, you will have money—then Lucien D’Arblet will come to you, madame, with that precious little packet in his hands, and he will say, ‘ You will marry me, ma chère, or I will make public these letters.’ Do you see ? Till then, amusez-vous, ma belle ; enjoy your life and your liberty as much as you desire ; I will not object to anything you do. Only you will not venture to marry—because I have these letters ? ”

“ You would prevent my marrying ? ” said Helen, faintly.

“ Mais, certainement that I should. Do you suppose any man would care to be your husband after he had read that last letter—the fifth, you know ? ”

No answer, save the choking sobs of his companion.

Monsieur D'Arblet waited a few minutes, watching her ; then, as she did not raise her head from the cushions of the carriage, where she had buried it, the Frenchman pulled the check-string of the carriage.

“ Now,” he said, “ I will wish you good-night, for we are close to your house. We have had our little talk, have we not ? ”

The brougham stopped, and the footman opened the door.

“ Good-night, madame, and many thanks for your kindness,” said D'Arblet, raising his hat politely.

In another minute he was gone, and Helen, hoping that the darkness had concealed the traces of her agitation from the servant's prying eyes, was driven on, more dead than alive, to her grandfather's house.

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING REVERIES.

It had been the darkest chapter of her life, that fatal month in Paris, when she had foolishly and recklessly placed herself in the power of a man so unscrupulous and so devoid of principle as Lucien D'Arblet.

It had begun in all innocence, on her part, at least. She had been very miserable ; she had discovered to the full how wild a mistake her marriage had been. She had felt herself to be fatally separated from Maurice, the man she loved, for ever ; and Monsieur D'Arblet had been kind to her ; he had pitied her for being tied to a husband who drank, and who gambled, and Helen had allowed herself to be pitied. D'Arblet had charming manners, and an accurate knowledge of the weaknesses of the fair sex ; he knew when to flatter and when to cajole her, when to be tenderly sympathetic to her sorrows, and

when to divert her thoughts to brighter and pleasanter topics than her own miseries. He succeeded in fascinating her completely. Whilst her husband was occupied with his own disreputable friends, Helen, sooner than remain alone in their hotel, night after night, was persuaded to accept Monsieur D'Arblet's escort to theatres and operas, and other public places, where her constant presence with him very soon compromised her amongst the few friends who knew her in Paris.

Then came scenes with her husband ; frantic letters of misery to this French vicomte, whom she imagined to be so devotedly attached to her, and, finally, one ever-to-be-repentcd letter, in which she offered to leave her husband for ever, and to come to him.

True, this letter did not reach its destination till too late, and Helen was mercifully saved from the fate which, in her wicked despair, she was ready to rush upon. Twenty-four hours after her return to England, she saw the horrible abyss upon which she had

stood, and thanked God, from the bottom of her heart, that she had been rescued, in spite of herself, from so dreadful a deed. But the letter had been written, and was in Lucien D'Arblet's possession. Later on, she learnt, by a chance conversation, the true character of the man, and shuddered when she remembered how nearly she had wrecked her whole life for him. And when her husband's death had placed her once more in the security and affluence of her grandfather's house, with fresh hopes and fresh chances before her, she had but one wish with regard to that Parisian episode of her life,—to forget it, as though it had never been.

She hoped, and as time went on, she felt sure, that she would never see Monsieur D'Arblet again. New hopes and new excitements occupied her thoughts. The man to whom in her youth she had given her heart, once more came across her life ; she was thrown very much into his society ; she learnt to love him more devotedly than ever, and when at last she had succeeded in esta-

blishing the sort of engagement which existed between them, she had assured him, and also assured herself, that no other man had ever, for one instant, filled her fancy. That stormy chapter of her married life was forgotten ; she resolutely wiped it out of her memory, as if it had never existed.

And now, after all this time—it was five years ago—she had met him again—this Frenchman, who had once compromised her name, and who now had possession of her letters.

There was a cruel irony of fate in the fact that she should be destined to meet him again, at Lady Kynaston's, the very house of all others where she would least have wished to see him.

There was, however, had she thought of it, nothing at all extraordinary in her having done so. No house in all London society was so open to foreigners as Walpole Lodge, and Monsieur Le Vicomte D'Arblet was no unknown upstart ; he bore a good old name ; he was clever, had taken an active part

in diplomatic life, and was a very well-known individual in Parisian society. He had been brought to Lady Kynaston's by a member of the French Embassy, who was an habitual frequenter of her soirées.

Neither, however, was meeting with Mrs. Romer entirely accidental on Monsieur D'Arblet's part. He had never forgotten the pretty Englishwoman who had so foolishly and recklessly placed herself in his power.

It is true he had lost sight of her, and other intrigues and other pursuits had filled his leisure hours ; but when he came to England, he had thought of her again, and had made a few careless enquiries after her. It was not difficult to identify her ; the Mrs. Romer who was now a widow, who lived with her rich grandfather, who was very old, who would probably soon die and leave her all his wealth, was evidently the same Mrs. Romer whom he had known. The friend who gave him the information spoke of her as lovely and *spirituelle*, and as a

woman who would be worth marrying some day. "She is often at Lady Kynaston's receptions," he had added.

"Mon cher, take me to your Lady Kynaston's soirées," had been Lucien D'Arblet's lazy rejoinder as they finished their evening smoke together. "I would like to meet my friend, *la belle veuve*, again, and I will see if she has forgotten me."

Bitter, very bitter were Mrs. Romer's remorseful meditations that night when she reached her grandfather's house at Princes Gate. Every detail of her acquaintance with Lucien D'Arblet came back to her with a horrible and painful distinctness. Over and over again she cursed her own folly, and bewailed the hardness of the fate which placed her once more in the hands of this man.

Would he indeed keep his cruel threats to her? Would he bring forward those letters to spoil her life once more—to prevent her from marrying Maurice, should she ever have the chance of doing so?

Stooping alone over her fire, with all the brightness and all the freshness gone out of her, with an old and almost haggard look in the face that was so lately beaming with smiles and dimples, Helen Romer asked herself shudderingly these bitter questions, over and over again.

Had she been sure of Maurice's love, she would have been almost tempted to have confessed her fault, and to have thrown herself upon his mercy ; but she knew that he did not love her well enough to forgive her. Too well she knew with what disgust and contempt Maurice would be likely to regard her past conduct ; such a confession would, she knew, only induce him to shake himself clear of her for ever. Indeed, had he loved her, it is doubtful whether Maurice would have been able to condone so grave a fault in the past history of a woman ; his own standard of honour stood too high to allow him to pass over lightly any disgraceful or dishonourable conduct, in those with whom he had to do. But, loving her not, she

would have been utterly without excuse in his eyes.

She knew it well enough. No, her only chance was in silence, and in vague hopes that time might rescue her out of her difficulties.

Meanwhile, whilst Helen Romer sat up late into the early morning, thinking bitterly over her past sins and her future dangers, Maurice Kynaston and his mother also kept watch together at Walpole Lodge after all the guests had gone away, and the old house was left alone again to the mother and son.

“Something troubles you, little mother,” said Maurice, as he stretched himself upon the rug by her bedroom fire, and laid his head down caressingly upon her knees.

Lady Kynaston passed her hand fondly over the short dark hair. “How well you know my face, Maurice! Yes, something has worried me all day—it is a letter from your brother.”

Maurice looked up laughingly. “What, is old John in trouble? That would be

something new. Has he taken a leaf out of my book, mother, and dropped his money at Newmarket, too?"

"No, you naughty boy, John has got more sense. No!" with a sigh—"I wish it were only money; I fear it is a worse trouble than that."

"My dear mother, you alarm me," cried Maurice, looking up in mock dismay; "why, whatever has he been and gone and done?"

"Oh, Maurice, it is nothing to laugh at—it is some woman—a girl he has met down at Kynaston; some nobody—a clergyman's daughter, or sister, or something—whom he says he is going to marry!" Lady Kynaston looked the picture of distress and dismay.

Maurice laughed softly. "Well, well, mother; there is nothing very dreadful after all—I am sure I wish him joy."

"My boy," she said below her breath, "I had so hoped, so trusted he would never marry—it seemed so unlikely—he seemed so completely happy in his

bachelor's life ; and I had hoped that you—that you—”

“ Yes, yes, mother dear, I know,” he said quickly, and twisted himself round till he got her hand between his, kissing it as he spoke ; “ but I—I never thought of that—dear old John, he has been the best of brothers to me ; and, mother dear, I know it is all your love to me ; but you and I, dear, we will not grudge him his happiness, will we ? ”

He knew so well her weakness—how that she had loved him at the expense of the other son, who was not so dear to her ; he loved her for it, and yet he did not at his heart think it right.

Lady Kynaston wiped a few tears away. “ You are always right, my boy, always, and I am a foolish old woman. But oh, Maurice, that is only half the trouble ! Who is this woman whom he has chosen ? Some country girl, ignorant of the ways of the world, unformed and awkward—not fitted to be his wife ! ”

"Does he say so?" laughed Maurice.

"No, no, of course not. Stay, where is his letter? Oh, there, on the dressing-table; give it me, my dear. No, this is what he says: 'Miss Nevill seems to me in every way to fulfil my ideal of a good and perfect woman, and if she will consent to marry me, I intend to make her my wife.'"

"Well, a good and perfect woman is a *rara avis*, at all events, mother."

"Oh, dear! but all men say that of a girl when they are in love—it amounts to very little."

"You see, he has evidently not proposed to her yet; perhaps she will refuse him."

"Refuse Sir John Kynaston, of Kynaston Hall! A poor clergyman's daughter! My dear Maurice, I gave you credit for more knowledge of the world. Besides, John is a fine-looking man. Oh, no, she is not in the least likely to refuse him."

"Then all we have got to do is to make the best of her," said Maurice, composedly.

"That is easily said, for you, who need

see very little of her. But John's wife is a person who will be of great importance to my happiness. Dear me ! and to think he might have had Lady Mary Hendrie for the asking : a charming creature, well born, highly educated and accomplished—every-thing that a man could wish for. And there were the De Vallery girls—either of them would have married him, and been a suit-able wife for him ; and he must needs go and throw himself away on a little country chit, who could have been equally happy, and much more suitably mated, with her father's curate. Maurice, my dear,” with a sudden change of voice, “ I wish you would go down and cut him out ; if you made love to her ever so little you could turn her head, you know.”

Maurice burst out laughing. “ Oh, you wicked, immoral little mother ! Did I ever hear such an iniquitous proposition ! Do you want *me* to marry her ? ”

“ No, no ! ” laughed his mother ; “ but you might make her think you meant

to, and then, perhaps, she would refuse John."

"I have not Kynaston Hall at my back, remember; after which you have given her the credit of angling. Besides, mother dear, to speak plainly, I honestly do not think my taste in women is in the least likely to be the same as John's. No, I think I will keep out of the way whilst the love-making is going on. I will go down and have a look at the young woman by-and-by when it is all settled, and let you know what I think of her. I dare say a good, honest country lass will suit John far better than a beautiful woman of the world, who would be sure to be miserable with him. Don't fret, little mother, make the best of her, if you can."

He rose, and stretched himself up to his full height before the fire. Lady Kynaston looked up at him, admiringly. Oh, she thought, if the money and the name could only have been his! How well he would have made use of it; how proud

she would have been of him—her handsome boy, whom all men liked, and all women would gladly love.

“A good son makes a good husband,” she said aloud, following her own thoughts.

“And John has been a good son, mother,” said Maurice cordially.

“Yes, yes, in his way, perhaps; but I was thinking of you, my boy, not of him, and how lucky will be the woman who is your wife, Maurice—will it be—”

Maurice stooped quickly, and laid his hand playfully over her lips.

“I don’t know, mother dear—never ask me—for I don’t know it myself;” and then he kissed her, and wished her good night, and left her.

She sat long over her fire, dreaming, by herself, thinking a little, perhaps, of the elder son, and the bride he was going to bring her, whom she should have to welcome whether she liked her or no, but thinking more of the younger, whose inner life she had studied, and who was so entirely dear

and precious to her. It was very little to her that he had been extravagant and thoughtless, that he had lost money in betting and racing—these were minor faults—and she and John between them had always managed to meet his difficulties; they had not been, in truth, very tremendous. But for that, he had never caused her one day's anxiety, never given her one instant's pain. “God grant he may get a wife who deserves him,” was the mother’s prayer that night. “I doubt if Helen be worthy of him; but if he loves her, as I believe he must do, no word of mine shall stand between him and his happiness.”

And then she went to bed, and dreamed, as mothers dream, of the child they love best.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEMBER FOR MEADOWSHIRE.

ABOUT five miles from Kynaston Hall, as the crow flies, across the fields, stood, as the house agents would have described it, “a large and commodious modern mansion, standing in about eighty acres of well-timbered park land.”

I do not know that any description that could be given of Shadonake would so well answer to the reality as the above familiar form of words.

The house was undoubtedly large, very large, and it was also modern, very modern. It was a handsome stone structure, with a colonnade of white pillars along the entrance side, and with a multiplicity of large plate-glass windows stretching away in interminable vistas in every direction. A broad gravel sweep led up to the front door ; to the right were the stables, large and handsome,

too, with a clock tower and a belfry over the gateway ; and to the left were the gardens and the shrubberies.

There had been an old house once at Shadonake, old and picturesque and uncomfortable ; but when the property had been purchased by the present owner—Mr. Andrew Miller,—after he had been returned as Liberal Member for the county, the old house was swept away, and a modern mansion, more suited to the wants and requirements of his family, arose in its place.

The park was flat, but well wooded ; the old trees, of course, remained intact ; but the gardens of the first house being rambling and old-fashioned, had been done away with to make room for others on a larger and more imposing scale ; and vineeries and pineries, orchid houses, and hot-houses of every description arose rapidly all over the site of the old bowling-green, and the wilderness, half kitchen garden, half rosary, that had served to content the former owners of

Shadonake, now all lying dead and buried in the chancel of the village church.

The only feature of the old mansion which had been left untouched was rather a remarkable one. It was a large lake or pond, lying south of the gardens, and about a quarter of a mile from the house. It lay in a sort of dip in the ground, and was surrounded on all four sides—for it was exactly square—by very steep high banks, which had been enclosed by steep stone steps, now grey, and broken, and moss-grown, which led down straight into the water. This pool was called Shadonake Bath. How long the steps had existed no one knew; probably for several hundred years, for there was a ghost story connected with it. Somebody was supposed, before the memory of anyone living, to have been drowned there, and to haunt the steps at certain times of the year.

It is certain that but for the fact of a mania for boating, and punting, and skating indulged in by several of his younger sons,

Mr. Miller, in his energy for sweeping away all things old, and setting up all things new, would not have spared the Bath any more than he had spared the bowling-green. He had gone so far, indeed, as to have a plan submitted to him for draining it, and turning it into a strawberry garden, and for doing away with the picturesque old stone steps altogether in order to encase the banks in red brick, suitable to the cultivation of peaches and nectarines; but Ernest and Charley, the Eton boys, had thought about their punts and their canoes, and had pleaded piteously for the Bath; so the Bath was allowed to remain untouched, greatly to the relief of many of the neighbours, who were proud of its traditions, and who, in the general destruction that had been going on at Shadonake, had trembled for its safety.

Where Mr. Miller had originally come from, nobody exactly knew. It was generally supposed that he had migrated early in life from northern and manufacturing districts,

where his father had amassed a large fortune. In spite, however, of his wealth, it is doubtful whether he would ever have achieved the difficult task of being returned for so exclusive and aristocratic a county as Meadowshire, had he not made a most prudent and politic marriage. He had married one of the Miss Esterworths, of Lutterton.

Now, everybody who has the slightest knowledge of Meadowshire and its internal politics, will see at once that Andrew Miller could not have done better for himself. The Esterworths are the very oldest and best of the old county families ; there can be no sort of doubt whatever as to their position and standing. Therefore when Andrew Miller married Caroline Esterworth, there was at once an end of all hesitation as to how he was to be treated amongst them. Meadowshire might wonder at Miss Caroline's taste, but it kept its wonder to itself, and held out the right hand of fellowship to Andrew Miller, then and ever after.

It is true that there were five Miss Ester-

worths, all grown up, and all unmarried, at the time when Andrew came a wooing to Lutterton Castle ; they were none of them remarkable for beauty, and Caroline, who was the eldest of the five, less so than the others. Moreover, there were many sons at Lutterton, and the daughters' portions were but small. Altogether the lovemaking had been easy and prosperous, for Caroline, who was a sensible young woman, had readily recognised the superior advantages of marrying an excellent man of no birth or breeding, with twenty thousand a year, to remaining Miss Esterworth to her dying day, in dignified but impecunious spinsterhood. Time had proved the wisdom of her choice. For some years the Millers had rented a small but pretty little house, within two miles of Lutterton, where, of course, everybody visited them, and got used to Andrew's squat, burly figure, and agreed to overlook his many little defects of speech and manner, in consideration of his many excellent qualities—and his wealth—

and where, in course of time, all their children, two daughters and six sons, were born.

And then a vacancy occurring opportunely, Mrs. Miller determined that her husband should stand in the Liberal interest for the county. She would have made a conservative of him had she thought it would answer better. How she toiled and how she slaved, and how she kept her Andrew, who was not by any means ambitious of the position, up to the mark, it boots not here to tell. Suffice it to say, that the deed was accomplished, and that Andrew Miller became M.P. for North Meadowshire.

Almost at the same time, Shadonake fell into the market, and Mrs. Miller perceived that the time had now come for her husband's wealth to be recognised and appreciated; or, as he himself expressed it, in vernacular that was strictly to the point if inelegant in diction, the time was come for him "to cut a splash."

She had been very clever, this daughter

of the Esterworths ; she had kept a tight rein over her husband all through the early years of their married life. She would have no ostentation, no vulgar display of wealth, no parading and flaunting of that twenty thousand per annum in their neighbours' faces ; and she had done what she had intended, she had established her husband's position well in the county—she had made him to be accepted, not only by reason of his wealth, but also because he was her husband ; she had roused no one's envy—she had never given cause for spite or jealousy—she had made him popular as well as herself. They had lived quietly and unobtrusively ; they had, of course, had everything of the best ; their horses and carriages were irreproachable, but they had not had more of them than their neighbours. They had entertained freely, and they had given their guests well-cooked dinners and expensive wines, but there had been nothing lavish in their entertainments, nothing that could make any of them go away and say to

themselves, with angry discontent, that “those Millers” were purse-proud, and vulgar in their wealth. When she had gone to her neighbours’ houses, Mrs. Miller had been handsomely, but never extravagantly dressed ; she had praised their cooks and expressed herself envious of their flowers, and had bemoaned her own inability to vie with their peaches and their pineapples—she had never talked about her own possessions, nor had she ever paraded her own eight thousand pounds worth of diamonds before the envious eyes of women who had none.

In this way she had made herself popular—and in this way she had won the county seat for her husband.

When, however, that great end and aim of her existence was accomplished, Caroline Miller felt that she might now fairly launch out a little. The time was come when she might reap the advantage of her long years of repression and patient waiting. Her daughters were growing up, her sons were

all at school ; for her children's sake it was time that she should take the lead in the county which their father's fortune and new position entitled them to, and which no one now was likely to grudge them. Shadonake, therefore, was bought, and the house straightway pulled down and built up again in a style, and with a magnificence, befitting Mr. Miller's wealth.

Bricks and mortar were Andrew Miller's delight. He was never so happy as during the three years that Shadonake House was being built ; every stone that was laid was a fresh interest to him ; every inch of brick wall, a keen and special delight. He had been disappointed not to have had the spoliation of Shadonake Bath ; it had been a distinct mortification to him to have to forego the four brick walls which would have replaced its ancient steps ; but then he had made it up to himself by altering the position of the front door three times, before it was finally settled to his satisfaction.

But all this was over by this time, and

when my story begins, Shadonake new House, as it was sometimes called, was built, and furnished and inhabited in every corner of its lofty rooms, and all along the spacious length of its many wide corridors.

One afternoon—it is about a week later than that *soirée* at Walpole Lodge, mentioned in a previous chapter—Mrs. Miller and her eldest daughter are sitting together in the large drawing-room at Shadonake. The room is furnished in that style of high artistic decoration that is now the fashion. There are rich Persian rugs over the polished oak floor; a high oak chimney-piece, with blue tiles inserted into it in every direction, and decorated with old Nankin china bowls and jars; a wide grate below, where logs of wood are blazing between brass bars; quantities of spindle-legged Chippendale furniture all over the room, and a profusion of rich gold embroidery and “textile fabrics” of all descriptions lighting up the carved oak “dado” and the sombre sage green of the walls. There are pictures, too, quite of the

best, and china of every period and every style upon every available bracket, and shelf, and corner where a cup or a plate can be made to stand. Four large windows on one side open on to the lawn ; two, at right angles to them, lead into a large conservatory, where there is, even at this dead season of the year, a blaze of exotic blossoms that fill the room with their sweet rich odour.

Mrs. Miller sits before a writing bureau of inlaid satin-wood, of an ancient pattern. She has her pen in her hand, and is docketting her visiting list. Beatrice Miller sits on a low four-legged stool by her mother's side, with a large Japanese china bowl on her knees filled with cards, which she takes out one after the other, reading the names upon them aloud to her mother, before tossing them into a basket, also of Japanese structure, which is on the floor in front of her.

Beatrice is Mrs. Miller's eldest daughter, and she is twenty. Guy is only eleven months older, and Edwin is a year younger

—they are both at Oxford ; next comes Geraldine, who is still in the school-room, but who is hoping to come out next Easter ; then Ernest and Charley, the Eton boys, and lastly, Teddy and Ralph, who are at a famous preparatory school, whence they hope, in process of time, to be drafted on to the regular college, following in the foot-steps of their elder brothers.

Of all this large family it is Beatrice, the eldest daughter, who causes her mother the most anxiety. Beatrice is like her mother—a plain but clever-looking girl, with the dark swart features and colouring of the Ester-worths, who are not a handsome race. Added to which, she inherits her father's short and somewhat stumpy figure. Such a personal appearance in itself is enough to cause uneasiness to any mother who is anxious for her daughter's future ; but when these disadvantages of looks are rendered still more peculiar by the fact that her hair had to be shaved off some years ago when she had scarlet fever,

and that it has never grown again properly, but is worn short and loose about her face like a boy's, with its black tresses tumbling into her eyes every time she looks down,— and when, added to this, Mrs. Miller also discovered to her mortification that Beatrice possessed a will of her own, and so decided a method of expressing her opinions and convictions, that she was not likely to be easily moulded to her own views, you will, perhaps, understand the extent of the difficulties with which she has to deal.

For, of course, so clever and so managing a woman as Mrs. Miller, has not allowed her daughter to grow up to the age of twenty without making the most careful and judiciously-laid schemes for her ultimate disposal. That Beatrice is to marry is a matter of course, and Mrs. Miller has well determined that the marriage is to be a good one, and that her daughter is to strengthen her father's position in Meadowshire, by a union with one or other of its leading families. Now, when Mrs. Miller came to

pass the marriageable men of Meadowshire under review, there was no such eligible bachelor amongst them all as Sir John Kynaston, of Kynaston Hall.

It was on him, therefore, that her hopes with regard to Beatrice were fixed. Fortune, hitherto, had seemed to smile favourably upon her. Beatrice had had one season in town, during which she had met Sir John frequently, and he had, contrary to his usual custom, asked her to dance several times when he had met her at balls. Mrs. Miller said to herself, that Sir John, not being a very young man, did not set much store upon mere personal beauty ; that he probably valued mental qualities in a woman more highly than the transient glitter of beauty ; and that Beatrice's good sense, and sharp, shrewd conversation, had evidently made a favourable impression upon him.

She never was more mistaken in her life. True, Sir John did like Miss Miller, he found her unconventional and amusing, but his only object in distinguishing her by his

attentions had been to pay a necessary compliment to the new M.P.'s daughter; a duty which he would have fulfilled equally had she been stupid as well as plain: moreover, as we have seen, few men were so intensely sensitive to beauty in a woman, as was Sir John Kynaston. Mrs. Miller, however, was full of hopes concerning him. To do her justice, she was not exactly vulgarly ambitious for her daughter; she liked Sir John personally, and had a high respect for his character, and she considered that Beatrice's high spirit and self-willed disposition would be most desirably moderated and kept in check by a husband so much older than herself. Lady Kynaston, moreover, was one of her best and dearest friends, and was her beau-ideal of all that a clever and refined lady should be. The match, in every respect, would have been a very acceptable one to her. Whether or no Miss Beatrice shared her mother's views on her behalf remains to be seen.

The mother and daughter are settling

together the preliminaries of a week's festivities, which Mrs. Miller has decided shall be held at Shadonake this winter. The house is to be filled, and there are to be a series of dinner parties, culminating in a ball.

“The Bayleys, the Westons, the Fosters, and two daughters, I suppose,” reads Mrs. Miller, aloud, from the list in her hand. “Any more for the second dinner-party, Beatrice?”

“Are you not going to ask the Daintrees, of Sutton, mother?”

“Oh dear me, another parson, Beatrice! I really don't think we can; I have got three already. They shall have a card for the ball.”

“You will ask that handsome girl who lives with them, won't you?”

“Not the slightest occasion for doing so,” replied her mother, shortly. Beatrice lifted her eyebrows.

“Why, she is the best-looking woman in all Meadowshire; we cannot leave her out.”

“ I know nothing about her, not even her name ; she is some kind of poor relation, I believe,—acts as the children’s governess. We have too many women as it is. No, I certainly shall not ask her. Go on to the next, Beatrice.”

“ But, mother, she is so very handsome ! Surely you might include her.”

“ Dear me, Beatrice, what a stupid girl you are ! What is the good of asking handsome girls, to cut you out in your own house ? I should have thought you would have had the sense to see that for yourself,” said Mrs. Miller, impatiently.

“ I think you are horribly unjust, mamma,” says Miss Beatrice, energetically ; “ and it is downright unkind to leave her out because she is handsome—as if I cared.”

“ How can I ask her if I do not know her name ? ” said her mother irritably, with just that amount of dread of her daughter’s rising temper to make her anxious to conciliate her. “ If you like to find out who she is and all about her—”

“ Yes, I will find out,” said Beatrice, quietly ; “ give me the note, I will keep it back for the present.”

“ Now, for goodness’ sake, go on child, and don’t waste any more time. Who are coming from town to stay in the house ? ”

“ Well, there will be Lady Kynaston, I suppose. ”

“ Yes. She won’t come till the end of the week. I have heard from her ; she will try and get down in time for the ball.”

“ Then there will be the Macpherson girls and Helen Romer. And, as a matter of course, Captain Kynaston must be asked ? ”

“ Yes. What a fool that woman is to advertise her feelings so openly that one is obliged to ask her attendant swain to follow her wherever she goes ! ”

“ On the contrary, I think her remarkably clever ; she gets what she wants, and the cleverest of us can do no more. It is a well-known fact to all Helen’s acquaintances, that not to ask Captain Kynaston to meet

her would be deliberately to insult her—she expects it as her right.”

“ All the same, it is in very bad taste and excessively underbred of her. However, I should ask Captain Kynaston in any case, for his mother’s sake, and because I like him. He is a good shot, too, and the coverts must be shot that week. Who next ? ”

“ Mr. Herbert Pryme.”

“ Goodness me ! Beatrice, what makes you think of *him* ? We don’t know anything about him—where he comes from or who are his belongings—he is only a nobody ! ”

“ He is a barrister, mamma ! ”

“ Yes, of course, I know that—but then, there are barristers of all sorts. I am sure I do not know what made you fix upon him ; you only met him two or three times in town.”

“ I liked him,” said Beatrice, carelessly ; “ he is a gentleman, and would be a pleasant man to have in the house.”

Her mother looked at her sharply. She was playing with the gold locket round her

neck, twisting it backwards and forwards along its chain, her eyes fixed upon the heap of cards on her lap. There was not the faintest vestige of a blush upon her face.

“However,” she continued, “if you don’t care about having him, strike his name out. Only it is a pity, because Sophy Macpherson is rather fond of him, I fancy.”

This was a lie; it was Miss Beatrice herself who was fond of him, but not even her mother, keen and quick-scented as she was, could have guessed it from her impassive face. Mrs. Miller was taken in completely.

“Oh,” she said, “if Sophy Macpherson likes him, that alters the case. Oh yes, I will ask him, by all means—as you say, he is a gentleman, and pleasant.”

“Look, mamma!” exclaimed Beatrice, suddenly; “there is uncle Tom riding up the drive.”

Now, Tom Esterworth was a very important personage; he was the present head of the Esterworth family, and, as such, the

representative of its ancient honours and traditions. He was a bachelor, and reigned in solitary grandeur at Lutterton Castle, and kept the hounds as his fathers had done before him.

Uncle Tom was thought very much of at Shadonake, and his visits always caused a certain amount of agitation in his sister's mind. To her dying day, she would be conscious that in Tom's eyes she had been guilty of a *mésalliance*. She never could get that idea out of her head ; it made her nervous and ill at ease in his presence. She hustled all her notes and cards hurriedly together into her bureau.

"Uncle Tom ! Dear me, what can he have come to-day for ! I thought the hounds were out. Ring the bell, Beatrice, he will like some tea. Where is your father ? "

"Papa is out superintending the building of the new pigsties," said Beatrice, as she rang the bell. "I think uncle Tom has been hunting ; he is in boots and breeches, I see."

“Dear me, I hope your father won’t come in with his muddy feet, and his hands covered with earth,” said Mrs. Miller, nervously.

Uncle Tom came in, a tall, dark-faced, strong-limbed man of fifty—an ugly man, if you will, but a gentleman, and an Esterworth every inch of him. He kissed his sister, and patted his niece on the cheek.

“Why weren’t you out to-day, Pussy?”

“You met so far off, uncle. I had no one to ride with to the meet. The boys will be back next week. Have you had a good run?”

“No, we’ve done nothing but potter about all the morning; there isn’t a scrap of scent.”

“Uncle Tom, will you give us a meet here when we have our house-warming?”

“Humph! you haven’t got any foxes at Shadonake,” answered her uncle. He had drawn his chair to the fire, and was warming his hands over the blazing logs. Beatrice was rather a favourite with him.

“I will see about it, Pussy,” he added, kindly, seeing that she looked disappointed. Mrs. Miller was pouring him out a cup of tea.

“Well, I’ve got a piece of news for you women!” says Mr. Esterworth, stretching out his hand for his tea. “John Kynaston’s going to be married!”

Mrs. Miller never knew how it was that the old Worcester tea-cup in her hand did not at this juncture fall prone to the ground into a thousand atoms at her brother’s feet. It is certain that only a very strong exercise of self-control and presence of mind saved it from destruction.

“Engaged to be married!” she said, with a gasp.

“That is news indeed,” cried Beatrice, heartily. “I am delighted.”

“Don’t be so foolish, Beatrice,” said her mother, quite sharply. “How on earth can you be delighted, when you don’t even know who it is? Who is it, Tom?”

“Ah, that is the whole pith of the

matter,” said Mr. Esterworth, who was not above the weakness of liking to be the bearer of a piece of gossip. “ I’ll give you three guesses, and I’ll bet you won’t hit it.”

“ One of the Courtenay girls ? ”

“ No.”

“ Anna Vivian ? ”

“ I know,” says Beatrice, nodding her head sagely ; “ it is that girl who lives with the Daintrees.”

“ Beatrice, how silly you are ! ” cries her mother.

Tom Esterworth turns round in his chair, and looks at his niece.

“ By Jove, you’ve hit it ! ” he exclaims. “ What a clever pussy you are, to be sure.”

And then the soul of the member’s wife became filled with consternation and disgust.

“ Well, I call it downright sly of John Kynaston ! ” she exclaims angrily ; “ picking out a nobody like that, behind all our

backs, and keeping it so quiet, too ; he ought to be ashamed of himself for such an unsuitable selection ! ”

Beatrice laughed. “ You know, uncle Tom, mamma wanted him to marry me.”

“ Beatrice, you should not say such things,” said her mother, colouring.

“ Whew ! ” whistled Mr. Esterworth. “ So that was the little game, Caroline, was it ? John Kynaston has better taste. He wouldn’t have looked at an ugly little girl like our pussy here, would he, Puss ? Miss Nevill is one of the finest women I ever saw in my life. She was at the meet to-day on one of his horses, and, by Jove ! she made all the other women look plain by the side of her ! Kynaston is a very lucky fellow.”

“ I think, mamma, there can be no doubt about sending Miss Nevill an invitation to our ball now,” said Beatrice, laughingly.

“ She will have to be asked to stay in the house,” said Mrs. Miller, with something akin to a groan. “ I cannot leave

her out, as Lady Kynaston is coming. Oh dear ! oh dear ! what fools men are, to be sure ! ”

But Beatrice was wicked enough to laugh again over her mother’s discomfiture.

CHAPTER IX.

ENGAGED.

It was quite true what Mr. Thomas Esterworth had said, that Vera was engaged to Sir John Kynaston.

It had all come about so rapidly, and withal so quietly, that, when Vera came to think of it, it rather took her breath away. She had expected it, of course; indeed, she had even planned and tried for it; but when it had actually come to her, she felt herself to be bewildered by the suddenness of it.

In the end, the climax of the love-making had been prosaic enough. Sir John had not felt himself equal to the task of a personal interview with the lady of his affections, with the accompanying risks of a personal rejection, which, in his modesty and humility with reference to her, he had believed to be quite on the cards. So he

had written to her. The note had been taken up to the vicarage by the footman, and had been brought into the dining-room by the vicarial parlour-maid, just as the three ladies were finishing breakfast, and after the vicar himself had left the room.

“A note from Kynaston, please ‘m” says rosy-cheeked Hannah, holding it forth before her, upon a small japanned tray, as an object of general family interest and excitement.

“For your master, Hannah?” says old Mrs. Daintree. “Are they waiting for an answer? You will find him in his study.”

“No, ma’am, it’s for Miss Vera.”

“Dear me!” with a suspicious glance across the table; “how very odd!”

Vera takes up the note and opens it.

“May I have the crest, auntie?” clamours Tommy, before she had read three words of it.

“Is it about the horse he has offered you to ride?” asks his mother.

But Vera answers nothing; she gets up

quietly and leaves the room without a word.

“Extraordinary!” gasps Mrs. Daintree; “Vera’s manners are certainly most abrupt and unladylike at times, Marion. I think you ought to point it out to her.”

Marion murmurs some unintelligible excuse and follows her sister—leaving the unfortunate Tommy a prey to his grandmother’s tender mercies. So brilliant an opportunity is not, of course, to be thrown away. Tommy’s fingers, having incontinently strayed in the direction of the sugar-basin, are summarily slapped for their indiscretion, and an admonition is straightway delivered to him in forcible language concerning the pains and penalties which threaten the ulterior destiny of naughty little boys in general, and of such of them in particular, who are specially addicted to the abstraction of lumps of sugar from the breakfast table.

Meanwhile, Marion has found her sister in the adjoining room standing up alone upon the hearthrug with Sir John Kynas-

ton's letter in her hands. She is not reading it now, she is looking steadfastly into the fire. It has fulfilled—nay, more than fulfilled—her wishes. The triumph of her success is pleasant to her, and has brought a little more than their usual glow into her cheeks, and yet—Heaven knows what vague and intangible dreams and fancies have not somehow sunk down chill and cold within her during the last five minutes.

Gratified ambition—flattered vanity—the joy of success—all this she feels to the full ; but nothing more ! There is not one single other sensation within her. Her pulses have not quickened, ever so little, as she read her lover's letter ; her heart has not throbbed, even once, with a sweeter, purer delight—such as she has read and heard that other women have felt.

“ I suppose I have no heart,” said Vera to herself ; “ it must be that I am cold by nature. I am happy ; but—but—I wonder what it feels like—this *love*—that there is so much talked and written about ? ”

And then Marion came in breathlessly.

“ Oh, Vera, what is it ? ”

Vera turns round to her, smiling serenely, and places the note in her hands.

This is what Sir John Kynaston has written :—

“ Dear Miss Nevill,—I do not think what I am about to say will be altogether unexpected by you. You must have surely guessed how sincere an affection I have learnt to feel for you. I know that I am unworthy of you, and I am conscious of how vast a disparity there is between my age and your own youth and beauty. But if my great love and devotion can in any way bridge over the gap that lies between us, believe me, that if you will consent to be my wife, my whole life shall be devoted to making you happy. If you can give me an answer to-day, I shall be very grateful, as suspense is hard to bear. But pray do not decide against me in haste, and without giving me every chance in your power.

“ Yours devotedly,

“ JOHN KYNASTON.”

"Oh! Vera, my darling sister, I am so glad!" cries Marion, in tearful delight, throwing her arms up round the neck of the young sister, who is so much taller than she is; "I had guessed it, dearest; I saw he was in love with you; and oh, Vera, I shall have you always near to me!"

"Yes, that will be nice," assents Vera, quietly, and a trifle absently, stroking her sister's cheek, with her eyes still fixed on the fire; "and of course," rousing herself with an effort, "of course I am a very lucky woman."

And then Mr. Daintree came in, and his wife rushed to him rapturously to impart the joyful news. There was a little pleasant confusion of broken words and explanations between the three, and then Marion whisked away, brimming over with triumphant delight to wave the flags of victory exultingly in her mother-in-law's face.

Eustace Daintree and Vera were alone. He took her hands within his, and looked steadfastly in her face.

“Vera, are you sure of yourself, my dear, in this matter?”

Her eyes met his for a moment, and then fell before his earnest gaze. She coloured a little.

“I am quite sure that I mean to accept Sir John’s proposal,” she said, with a little uneasy laugh.

“Child, do you love him?”

Her eyes met his again; there was a vague trouble in them. The man had a power over her, the power of sheer goodness of soul. She could never be untrue to herself with Eustace Daintree; she was always at her very best with him, humble and gentle; and she could no more have told him a lie, or put him off with vague conventionalities, than she could have committed a deadly sin.

What is it about some people that, in spite of ourselves, they thus force out of us the best part of our nature; that base and unworthy thoughts cannot live in us before them,—that they melt out of our hearts as

the snow before the rays of the sun ? Even though the effect may be transient, such is the power of their faith, and their truth, and their goodness, that it must needs call forth in us something of the same spirit as their own.

Such was Eustace Daintree's influence over Vera. It was not because of his office, for no one was less susceptible than Vera—a Protestant brought up, with but vague ideas of her own faith, in a Catholic land—to any of those recognized associations with which a purely English-bred girl might have felt the character of the clergyman of the parish where she lived to be invested. It was nothing of that sort that made him great to her ; it was, simply and solely, the goodness of the man that impressed her. His guilelessness, his simplicity of mind, his absolute uprightness of character, and with it all, the absence in him of any assumption of authority, or of any superiority of character over those about him. His very humility made her humble with him, and

exalted him into something saintly in her eyes.

When Eustace looked at her fixedly, with all his good soul in his earnest eyes, and said to her again, "Do you love him, Vera?" Vera could but answer him simply and frankly, almost against her will, as it were,

"I don't think I do, Eustace; but then I do not quite know what love is. I do not think, however, that it can be what I feel."

"My child, no union can be hallowed without love. Vera, you will not run into so great a danger?" he said anxiously.

She looked up at him smiling.

"I like him better than any one else, at all events. Better than Mr. Gisburne, for instance. And I think, I do really think, Eustace, it will be for my happiness."

The vicar looked grave. "If Sir John Kynaston were a poor man, would you marry him?"

And Vera answered bravely, though with a heightened colour—

"No ; but it is not only for the money, Eustace ; indeed it is not. But—but—I should be miserable without it ; and I must do something with my life."

He drew her near to him, and kissed her forehead. He understood her. With that rare gift of sympathy—the highest, the most God-like of all human attributes—he felt at once what she meant. It was wonderful that this man, who was so unworldly, so unselfish, so pure of the stains of earth himself, should have seen at once her position from her own point of view ; that was neither a very exalted one, nor was it very free from the dross of worldliness. But it was so. All at once he seemed to know by a subtle instinct what were the weaknesses, and the temptations, and the aims of this girl, who, with all her faults, was so dear to him. He understood her better, perhaps, than she understood herself. Her soul was untouched by passion ; the story of her life was unwritten ; there was no danger for her yet ; and perchance it might be that the storms of

life would pass her by unscathed, and that she might remain sheltered for ever in the safe haven which had opened so unexpectedly to receive her.

"There is a peril in the course you have chosen," he said, gravely; "but your soul is pure, and you are safe. And I know, Vera, that you will always do your duty."

And the tears were in her eyes as he left her.

When he had gone, she sat down to write her answer to Sir John Kynaston. She dipped her pen into the ink, and sat with it in her hand, thinking. Her brother-in-law's words had aroused a fresh train of thought within her. There seemed to be an amount of solemnity in what she was about to do that she had not considered before. It was true that she did not love him; but then, as she had told Eustace just now, she loved no one else; she did not rightly understand what love meant, indeed. And is a woman to wait on in patience for years until love comes to her? Would it ever come? Pro-

bably not, thought Vera ; not to her, who thought herself to be cold, and not easily moved. There must be surely many women to whom this wonderful thing of love never comes. In all her experience of life there was nothing to contradict this. It was not as if she had been a girl who had never left her native village, never tasted of the pleasures of life, never known the sweet incense of flattery and devotion. Vera had known it all. Many men had courted her ; one or two had loved her dearly, but she had not loved them. Amongst them all, indeed, there had been never one whom she had liked with such a sincere affection as she now felt for this man, who seemed to love her so much, and who wrote to her so diffidently, and yet so devotedly.

“ I love him as well as I am ever likely to love any one,” said Vera, to herself. Yet still she leant her chin upon her hand and looked out of the window at the grey bare branches of the elm-trees across the damp green lawn, and still her letter was unwritten.

“Vera!” cries Marion, coming in hurriedly and breaking in upon her reverie, “the footman from Kynaston is waiting all this time to know if there is any answer! Shall I send him away? Or have you made up your mind?”

“Oh yes, I have made up mind. My note will be ready directly; he may as well take it. It will save the trouble of sending up to the Hall later.” For Vera remembers that there is not a superfluity of servants at the vicarage, and that they all of them have plenty to do.

And thus, a mere trifle—a feather, as it were, on the river of life—settled her destiny for her out of hand.

She dipped her pen into the ink once more, and wrote:—

“Dear Sir John,—You have done me a great honour in asking me to be your wife. I am fully sensible of your affection, and am very grateful for it. I fear you think too highly of me; but I will endeavour to prove myself worthy of your good opinion,

and to make you as good a wife as you deserve.

“Yours,

“VERA NEVILL.”

She was conscious herself of the excessive coldness of her note, but she could not help it. She could not, for the life of her, have made it warmer. Nothing, indeed, is so difficult as to write down feelings that do not exist; it is easier to simulate with our spoken words and our looks; but the pen that is urged beyond its natural inclination seems to stiffen into ice in our fingers. But, at all events, she had accepted him.

It was a relief to her when the thing was done, and the note sent off, beyond the possibility of recall.

After that, there had been no longer any leisure for her doubting thoughts. There was her sister's delighted excitement, Mrs. Daintree's oppressive astonishment, and even Eustace's calmer satisfaction in her bright prospects, to occupy and divert her thoughts. Then there came her lover himself, tender

and grateful, and with so worshipful a respect in every word and action that the most sensitive woman could scarcely have been ruffled or alarmed by the prospects of so deferential a husband.

In a few days Vera became reconciled to her new position, which was in truth a very pleasant one to her. There were the congratulations of friends and acquaintances to be responded to ; the pleasant flutter of adulation that surrounded her once more ; the little daily excitement of John Kynaston's visits,—all this made her happy and perfectly satisfied with the wisdom of her decision.

Only one thing vexed her.

“ What will your mother say, John ? ” she had asked the very first day she had been engaged to him.

“ It will not make much difference to me, dearest, whatever she may say.”

Nor in truth would it, for Sir John, as we have seen, had never been a devoted son, nor had he ever given his confidence to his

mother ; he had always gone his own way, independently of her.

“ But it must needs make a difference to me,” Vera had insisted. “ You have written to her, of course.”

“ Oh, yes ; I wrote and told her I was engaged to you.”

“ And she has not written ? ”

“ Yes, there was a message for you—her love or something.”

Sir John evidently did not consider the subject of much importance. But Vera was hurt that Lady Kynaston had not written to her.

“ I will never enter any family where I am not welcome,” she had said to her lover, proudly.

And then Sir John had taken fright, for she was so precious to him that the fear of losing her was becoming almost as a nightmare to him, and, possibly, at the bottom of his heart he knew how feeble was his hold over her. He had written off to his mother that day a letter that was almost a command, and had told her to write to Vera.

This letter was not likely to prepossess Lady Kynaston, who was a masterful little lady herself, in her daughter-in-law's favour; it did more harm than good. She had obeyed her son, it is true, because he was the head of the family, and because she stood in awe of him; but the letter thus written under compulsion, was not kind—it was not even just.

“Horrid girl!” had said Lady Kynaston, angrily, to herself, as she had sat down to her writing-table to fulfil her son's mandate. “It is not likely that I can be very loving to her—some wretched, second-rate girl, evidently—for not even Caroline Miller, who, goodness knows, rakes up all the odds and ends of society—ever heard of her before!”

It is not to be supposed that a letter undertaken under such auspices could be in any way conciliatory or pleasant in its tone. Such as it was, Vera put it straight into the fire directly she had read it; no one ever saw it but herself.

"I have heard from your mother," she said to Sir John.

"Yes? I am very glad. She wrote everything that was kind, no doubt."

"I dare say she meant to be kind," said Vera; which was not true, because she knew perfectly that there had been no kindness intended. But she pursued the subject no further.

"I hope you will like Maurice," said Sir John, presently; "he is a good-hearted boy, though he has been sadly extravagant, and given me a good deal of trouble."

"I shall be glad to know your brother," said Vera, quietly. "Is he coming to Kynaston?"

"Yes, eventually; but you will meet him first at Shadonake when you go to stay there: they have asked a large party for that week, I hear, and Maurice will be there."

Now, by this time, Vera knew that the photograph she had once found in the old writing-table drawer at Kynaston was that of her lover's brother Maurice.

CHAPTER X.

A MEETING ON THE STAIRS.

I HAVE often wondered why, in the ordering of human destinies, some special Providence, some guardian spirit who is gifted with fore-knowledge, is not mercifully told off to each of us, so to order the trifles of our lives that they may combine to the working together of our weal, instead of conspiring, as they too often and too evidently do, for our woe.

Look back upon your own life, and upon the lives of those whose story you have known the most intimately, and see what straws, what nonentities, what absurd trivialities have brought about the most important events of existence. Recollect how, and in what manner, those people whom it would have been well for you never to have known, came across you. How those whose influence over you is for good, were

kept out of your way at the very crisis of your life. Think what a different life you would have led ; I do not mean only happier, but how much better and purer, if some absurd trifle had not seemed to play into the hands, as it were, of your destiny, and to set you in a path whereof no one could at the time foresee the end.

Someone had looked out their train in last month's Bradshaw, unwitting of the autumn alterations, and was kept from you till the next day. You took the left instead of the right side of the square on your way home, or you stood for a minute gossiping at your neighbour's door, and there came by someone who ultimately altered and embittered your whole life, and who, but for that accidental meeting, you would, probably, never have seen again ; or some evil adviser was at hand, whilst one whose opinion you revered, and whose timely help would have saved you from taking that false step you ever after regretted, was kept to the house, by Heaven knows what ridiculous trifle—a

cold in the head, or finger-ache—and did not see you to warn and to keep you back from your own folly until it was too late.

People say these things are ordered for us. I do not know; it may be so, but sometimes it seems rather as if we were irresponsible puppets, tossed and buffeted about, blindly and helplessly, upon life's river, as fluttering dead leaves are danced wildly along the swift current of a Highland stream. Such a trifle might have saved us! yet there was no pitying hand put forth to avert that which, in our human blindness, appeared to us to be as unimportant as any other incident of our lives.

Life is an unsolvable problem. Shall we ever, in some other world, I wonder, read its riddles aright?

All these moral dissertations have been called forth because Vera Nevill went to stay for a week at Shadonaké. If she had known—what we none of us know—the future, she doubtless would have stayed away. Fate, a beneficent fate, indeed—made,

I am bound to confess, a valiant effort in her behalf. Little Minnie fell ill the day before her departure ; and the symptoms were such that everybody in the house believed that she was sickening for scarlet fever. The doctor, however, having been hastily summoned, pronounced the disease to be an infantile complaint of a harmless and innocuous nature, which he dignified by the delusively poetical name of “ Rosalia.”

“ It is not infectious, Mr. Smee, I hope ? ” asked Marion, anxiously. “ Nothing to prevent my sister going to stay at the Millers’ to-morrow ? ”

“ Not in the least infectious, Mrs. Daintree, and anybody in the house can go wherever they like, except the child herself, who must be kept in a warm room for two days, when she will probably be quite well again.”

“ I am glad, dear, there is nothing to put a stop to your visit ; it would have been such a pity,” said Marion, in her blindness, to her sister, afterwards.

So the fates had a game of pitch and toss with Vera's future, and settled it amongst them to their own satisfaction, probably, but not, it will be seen, for Vera's own good or ultimate happiness.

On the afternoon of the 3rd day of January, therefore, Eustace Daintree drove his sister-in-law over to Shadonake in the open basket pony-carriage, and deposited her and her box safely at the stone-colonnaded door of that most imposing mansion, which she entered exactly ten minutes before the dressing-bell rang, and was conducted almost immediately upstairs to her own room.

Some twenty minutes later there are still two ladies sitting on in the small tea-room, where it is the fashion at Shadonake to linger between the hours of five and seven, who alone have not yet moved to obey the mandate of the dressing-bell.

"What *is* the good of waiting?" says Beatrice, impatiently; "the train is often late, and besides, he may not come till the nine o'clock train."

"That is just what I want to wait for," answers Helen Romer. "I want just to hear if the carriage has come back, and then I shall know for certain."

"Well, you know how frightfully punctual papa is, and how angry it makes him if anybody is late."

"Just two minutes more, Beatrice; I can dress very quickly when once I set to work," pleads Helen.

Beatrice sits down again on the arm of the sofa, and resigns herself to her fate; but she looks rather annoyed and vexed about it.

Mrs. Romer paces the room feverishly and impatiently.

"What did you think of Miss Nevill?" asks Beatrice.

"I could hardly see her in her hat and that thick veil; but she looked as if she were handsome."

"She is *beautiful!*!" says Beatrice, emphatically, and uncle Tom says—"

"Hush!" interrupts Helen, hurriedly.

“ Is not that the sound of wheels ?—Yes, it is the carriage.”

She flies to the door.

“ Take care, Helen,” says Beatrice, anxiously ; “ don’t open the door wide, don’t let the servants think we have been waiting, it looks so bad—so—so unladylike.”

But Helen Romer does not even hear her; she is listening intently to the approaching sounds, with the half-opened door in her hand

The tea-room door opens into a large inner hall, out of which leads the principal staircase ; the outer or entrance-hall is beyond ; and presently the stopping of the carriage, the opening and shutting of doors from the servants’ departments, and all the usual bustle of an arrival are heard.

The two girls stand close together listening, Beatrice hidden in the shadow of the room.

“ There are *two* voices ! ” cries Helen, in a disappointed tone ; “ he is not alone ! ”

“ I suppose it is Mr. Pryme—mamma said

he might come by this train," answers Beatrice, so quietly that no one could ever have guessed how her heart was beating.

"Helen, *do* let us run upstairs; I really cannot stay. Let *me* go, at all events!" she adds, with a sudden agony of entreaty as the guests were heard advancing towards the door of the inner hall. And as Helen made not the slightest sign of moving, Beatrice slipped past her and ran lightly and swiftly across the hall upstairs, and disappeared along the landing above just as Captain Kynaston and Mr. Herbert Pryme appeared upon the scene below.

No such scruples of modesty troubled Mrs. Romer. As the young men entered the inner hall preceded by the butler who was taking them up to their rooms, and followed by two footmen who were bearing their portmanteaus, Helen stepped boldly forward out of the shelter of the tea-room, and held out her hand to Captain Kynaston.

"How do you do? How late your train is."

Maurice looked distinctly annoyed, but of course he shook hands with her.

"How are you, Mrs. Romer? I did not expect you to be here till tomorrow."

"Yes, we are late," consulting his watch; "only twenty minutes to dress in—I must look sharp."

Meanwhile the stranger, Mr. Pryme, was following the butler upstairs.

Helen lowered her voice.

"I *must* speak to you a minute, Maurice; it is six weeks since we have met, and to meet in public would be too trying. Please dress as quickly as ever you can; I know you can dress quickly, if you choose; and wait for me here at the bottom of the stairs,—we might get just three minutes together before dinner.

There were the footmen and the portmanteaus within six yards of them, and Mr. Pryme and the butler still within ear-shot. What was Maurice to do? He could not really listen to a whole succession of

prayers and entreaties and piteous appeals. There was neither the time, nor was it the place, for either discussion or remonstrance. All he could do was to nod a hasty assent to her request.

“Then I must make haste,” he said, and ran quickly upstairs in the wake of the other guest.

The staircase at Shadonake was very wide and very handsome, and thoroughly in keeping with the spacious character of the house. It consisted of one wide flight of shallow steps with a richly carved balustrade on either side of it, leading straight down from a large square landing above. Both landing and steps were carpeted with thick velvet-pile carpet, so that no jarring footfall was ever heard upon them. The hall into which the staircase led was paved in coloured mosaic tiles, and was half covered over with rich Persian rugs. A great many doors, nearly all the sitting-rooms of the house, in fact, opened into it, and the blank spaces of the wall were filled in with banks of large hand-

some plants, palms and giant ferns, and azaleas in full bloom, which were daily rearranged by the gardeners in every available corner.

At the foot of the staircase, and with his back to it, leaning against the balustrade stood Captain Kynaston, exactly four minutes before the dinner was announced.

Most people were in the habit of calling Maurice a good-looking man, but if anybody had seen him now for the first time it is doubtful whether they would have endorsed that favorable opinion upon his personal appearance. A thoroughly ill-tempered expression of face seldom enhances anyone's good looks; and if ever a man looked in a bad temper, Maurice Kynaston did so at the present moment.

He stood with his hands in his trousers pockets, and his eyes fixed upon his own boots, and he looked as savage as it was well possible for a man to look.

He was waiting here for Helen, because he had told her that he would do so, and

when Captain Kynaston promised anything to a lady he always kept his word.

But to say that he hated being there, is but a mild term for the rage and disgust he experienced.

To be waylaid and attacked thus, directly he had set foot in the house, with a stranger and three servants looking on so as to render him absolutely helpless ; to be uncomfortably hurried over his toilet, and inveigled into a sort of rendezvous at the foot of a public staircase, where any number of people might at any minute enter from any one of the six or eight surrounding doors, was enough of itself to try his temper ; but when he came to consider how Helen, in thus appropriating him, and making him obey her caprices, was virtually breaking her side of the treaty between them ; that she was exacting from him the full amount of servitude and devotion which an open engagement would demand, and yet she had agreed to deny any such engagement between them openly,—it was, he felt, more

than he could continue to bear with meekness.

Meekness, indeed, was in no way Maurice Kynaston's distinguishing characteristic. He was masterful and imperious by nature ; to be the slave of any woman, was neither pleasant nor profitable to him. Honour, indeed, had bound him to Helen, and had he loved her she might have lead him. Her position gave her a certain hold over him, had she known how to appeal to his heart ; but he loved her not, and to control his will and his spirit was beyond her power.

Maurice said to himself that he would put a stop to this system of persecution, once and for all—that this interview which she herself had contrived, should be made the opportunity of a few forcible words, that should frighten her into submission.

So he stood fretting, and fuming, and raging, waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

There was a soft rustle as of a woman's

dress, behind him. He turned sharply round.

— Halfway down the stairs came a woman whom he had never seen before. A black velvet dress, made high in the throat, with a wide collar of heavy lace upon her shoulders, hung clinging about the outlines of her tall and perfect figure; her hands, with some lace ruffles falling about her wrists, were simply crossed before her. The light of a distant hanging-lamp shone down upon her, just catching one diamond star that glittered among the thick coils of her hair—she wore no other ornament. She came down the stairs slowly, almost lingeringly, with a certain grace in her movements, and without a shadow of embarrassment or self-consciousness.

Maurice drew aside to let her pass him—looking at her—for how could he choose but look? But when she reached the bottom of the steps, she turned her face towards him.

“ You are Maurice—are you not? ” she

said, and put forth both her hands towards him.

An utter bewilderment as to who she was, made him speechless ; his mind had been full of Helen and his own troubles ; everything else had gone out of his head. She coloured a little, still holding out her hands to him.

“ I am Vera,” she said, simply, and there was a little deprecating appeal in the words as though she would have added, “ Be my friend.”

He took the hands—soft slender hands that trembled a very little in his grasp—within his own, and some nameless charm in their gentle touch brought a sudden flush into his face, but no appropriate words concerning his pleasure at meeting her, or his gratification at their future relations, fell from Maurice Kynaston’s lips. He only held her thus by her hands, and looked at her—looked at her as if he could never look at her enough—from her head to her feet, and from her feet up again to her head,

till a sudden wave of colour flooded her face, at the earnestness of his scrutiny.

“Vera—*Vera Nevill?*” was all he said; and then below his breath, as though his absolute amazement were utterly irrepressible: “*By Jove!*” And Vera laughed softly, at the thoroughly British character of the exclamation.

“How like an Englishman!” she said, “An Italian would have paid me fifty pretty compliments in half the time you have taken just to stare at me!”

“What a charming *tableau vivant!*” exclaims a voice above them, as Mrs. Romer comes down the staircase. “You really look like a scene in a play! Pray don’t let me disturb you.”

“I am making friends with my sister-in-law that is to be, Mrs. Romer,” says Maurice, who has dropped Vera’s hands with a guilty suddenness, and now endeavours to look completely at his ease—an effort in which he signally fails.

“Were you? Dear me! I thought you

and Miss Nevill were practising the pose of the ‘Huguenots!’”

Now the whole armoury of feminine weapons—impertinence, spite, and bad manners, born of jealousy—is utterly beneath the contempt of such a woman as Vera; but she is no untried, inexperienced country girl such as Mrs. Romer imagined her to be, disconcerted or stricken dumb by such an attack. She knew instantly that she had been attacked, and in what manner, and she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

“I have never seen that picture, the ‘Huguenots,’ Mrs. Romer,” she said, quietly; “do you think there is a photograph or a print of it at Kynaston, Maurice? If so, you or John must show it to me.”

And how Mrs. Romer hated her then and there, from that very minute until her life’s end, it would not be easy to set forth!

The utter *insouciance*, the lady-like ignoring of Helen’s impertinence; the quiet assumption of what she knew her own posi-

tion in the Kynaston family to be, down to the sisterly "Maurice," whereby she addressed the man whom in public, at least, Mrs. Romer was forced to call by a more formal name—all proved to that astute little woman that Vera Nevill was no ordinary antagonist, no village maiden to be snubbed or patronised at her pleasure, but a woman of the world, who understood how to fight her own battles, and was likely, as she was forced to own to herself, to "give back as good as she got."

Not another single word was spoken between them, for at that very minute a door was thrown open, and the whole of the party in the house came trooping forth in pairs from the drawing-room, in a long procession, on their way to the dining-room.

First came Mr. Miller, with old Mrs. Macpherson on his arm. Then Mr. Pryme and Miss Sophy Macpherson; her sister, behind, with Guy Miller; Beatrice looking melancholy, with the curate in charge; and

her mother last, with Sir John, who had come over from Kynaston to dinner. Edwin Miller, the second son, by himself, brought up the rear.

There was some laughter at the expense of the three defaulters who, of course, were supposed to have only just hurried downstairs.

"Aha! just saved your soup, ladies!" cried Mr. Miller, laughingly; "fall in, fall in, as best you can!"

Mrs. Miller came to the rescue, and, by a rapid stroke of generalship, marshalled them into their places.

Miss Nevill, of course, was a stranger; Helen had been on intimate terms with them all for years; Vera, besides, was standing close to Maurice.

"Please take in Miss Nevill, Captain Kynaston, and Edwin, my dear, give your arm to Mrs. Romer."

Edwin, who was a pleasant-looking boy, with plenty to say for himself, hurried forward with alacrity; and Helen had to

accept her fate with the best grace she could.

“ Well, how did you get on with Vera, and how did you like her ? ” asked Sir John, coming round to his brother’s side of the table when the ladies had left the room. He had noted with pleasure that Vera and Maurice had talked incessantly throughout the dinner.

“ My dear fellow ! ” cried Maurice, heartily, “ she is the handsomest woman I ever met in my life ! I give you my word that, when she introduced herself to me coming downstairs, I was so surprised, she was so utterly different to what I and the mother have been imagining, that upon my life I couldn’t speak a word—I could do nothing but stare at her ! ”

“ You like her, then ? ” said his brother, smiling, well pleased at his openly expressed admiration.

“ I think you are a very lucky fellow, old man ! Like her ! of course I do ; she’s a down-right good sort ! ”

And if Sir John was slightly shocked at the irreverence of alluding to so perfect and pure a woman as his adored Vera by so familiar a phrase as "a good sort," he was, at all events, too pleased by Maurice's genuine approval of her to find any fault with his method of expressing it.

CHAPTER XI.

AN IDLE MORNING.

LEANING against a window-frame at the end of a long corridor on the second floor, and idly looking out over the view of the wide lawns and empty flower-beds which it commands, stands Mr. Herbert Pryme, on the second morning after his arrival at Shadonake House.

It is after breakfast, and most of the gentlemen of the house have dispersed ; that is to say, Mr. Miller has gone off to survey his new pigsties, and his sons and a Mr. Nethercliff, who arrived last night, have ridden to a meet some fifteen miles distant, which the ladies had voted to be too far off to attend.

Mr. Pryme, however, is evidently not a keen sportsman ; he has declined the offer of a mount which Guy Miller has hospitably

pressed upon him, and he has also declined to avail himself of his host's offer of the services of the gamekeeper. Curiously enough, another guest at Shadonake, whose zeal for hunting has never yet been impeached, has followed his example.

"What on earth do they meet at Fretly for!" Maurice Kynaston had exclaimed last night to young Guy, as the morrow's plans had been discussed in the smoking-room; "it's the worst country I ever was in, all plough and woodlands, and never a fox to be found. Your uncle ought to know better than to go there. I certainly shan't take the trouble to get up early to go to that place."

"Not go?" repeated Guy, aghast; "you don't mean to say you won't go, Kynaston?"

"That's just what I do mean, though."

"What the deuce will you do with yourself all day?"

"Lie in bed," answered Maurice, between the puffs of his pipe; "we've had a precious

hard day's shooting to-day, and I mean to take it easy to-morrow."

And Captain Kynaston was as good as his word. He did not appear in the breakfast-room the next morning until the men who were bound for Fretly had all ridden off and were well out of sight of the house. What he had stayed for, he would have been somewhat puzzled to explain. He was not the kind of man who, as a rule, cared to dawdle about all day with women when there was any kind of sport to be had, from hunting down to ratting; more especially was he disinclined for any such dawdling when Helen Romer was amongst the number of the ladies so left to be danced attendance upon. And yet he distinctly told himself that he meant to be devoted for this one day to the fair sex. All yesterday he had been crossed and put out; the men had been out shooting from breakfast till dinner; some of the ladies had joined them with the Irish-stew at lunch time; Helen had been amongst them, but not Miss Nevill.

Maurice, in spite of the pheasants having been plentiful, and the sport satisfactory, had been in a decidedly bad temper all the afternoon in consequence. In the evening, the party at dinner had been enlarged by an influx of country neighbours ; Vera had been hopelessly divided from him and absorbed by other people the whole evening ; he had not exchanged a single word with her all day.

Captain Kynaston was seized with an insatiable desire to improve his acquaintance with his sister-in-law to be. It was his duty, he told himself, to make friends with her ; his brother would be hurt, he argued, and his mother would be annoyed if he neglected to pay a proper attention to the future Lady Kynaston. There could be no doubt that it was his duty ; that it was also his pleasure did not strike him so forcibly as it should have done, considering the fact that a man is only very keen to create duties for himself when they are proportionately mingled with that which is pleasant and agreeable. The

exigencies of his position, with regard to his elder brother's bride, having been forcibly borne in upon him—combined possibly with the certain knowledge that the elder brother himself would be hunting all day—compelled him to stop at home and devote himself to *Vera*. Mr. Herbert Pryme, however, had no such excuse, real or imaginary, and yet he stands idly by the corridor window—idly, yet perfectly patiently—relieving the tedium of his position by the unexciting entertainment of softly whistling the popular airs from the *Cloches de Corneville* below his breath.

Herbert Pryme is a good-looking young fellow of about six-and-twenty ; he looks his profession all over, and is a good type of the average young barrister of the present day. He has fair hair, and small, close-cropped whiskers ; his face is retrieved from boyishness by strongly marked and rather heavy features ; he studiously affects a solemn and imposing gravity of face and manner, and a severe and elderly style of dress, which he

hopes may produce a favourable effect upon the non-legal minds of his somewhat imaginary clients.

It is doubtful, however, whether Mr. Pryme has not found a shorter and pleasanter road to fortune than that slow and toilsome route along which the legal muse leads her patient votaries.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes elapse, and still Mr. Pryme looks patiently out of the window, and still he whistles the song of the bells. The only sign of weariness he gives is to take out his watch, which, by the way, is suspended by a broad black ribbon, and lives, not in his waistcoat pocket, but in a "fob," and is further decorated by a very large and old-fashioned seal. Having consulted a timepiece, which for size and thickness might have belonged to his great-grandfather, he returns it to his fob, and resumes his whistling.

Presently a door at the further end of the corridor softly opens and shuts, and Mr. Pryme looks up quickly.

Beatrice Miller, looking about her a little guiltily, comes swiftly towards him along the passage.

"Mamma kept me such ages!" she says, breathlessly; "I thought I should never get away."

"Never mind, so long as you are here," he answers, holding her by both hands. "My darling, I must have a kiss; I hungered for one all yesterday."

He looks into her face eagerly and lovingly. To most people Beatrice is a plain girl, but to this man she is beautiful; his own love for her has invested her with a charm and a fascination that no one else has seen in her.

Oh! divine passion, that can thus glorify its object. It is like a dash of sunshine over a winter landscape, which transforms it into the loveliness of spring; or the magic brush of the painter, which can turn a ploughed field and a barren common into the golden glories of a Cuyp or a Turner.

Thus it was with Herbert Pryme. He

looked at Beatrice with the blinding glamour of his own love in his eyes, and she was beautiful to him. Truth to say, Beatrice was a woman whom to love once was to love always. There was so much that was charming and loveable in her character, so great a freshness of mind and soul about her, that, although from lack of beauty she had hitherto failed to attract love, having once secured it, she possessed that rare and valuable faculty of being able to retain it; which many women, even those who are the most beautiful, are incapable of.

"It is just as I imagined about Mr. Nethercliff," says Beatrice, laughing; "he has been asked here for my benefit. Mamma has just been telling me about him; he is Lord Garford's nephew, and his heir. Lord Garford's place, you know, is quite the other side of the county; he is poor, so I suppose I might do for him," with a little grimace. "At all events, I am to sit next to him at dinner to-night, and make myself civil. You see, I am to

be offered to all the county magnates in succession.”

Herbert Pryme still holds her hands, and looks down with grave vexation into her face.

“And how do you suppose I shall feel whilst Mr. Nethercliff is making love to you ? ”

“ You may make your mind quite easy ; it is impossible that there should be another man foolish enough in all England to want to make love to such an ‘ ugly duckling ’ as I am ! ”

“ Don’t be so silly, child, and don’t fish for compliments,” he answers fondly, stroking her short dark hair, which he thinks so characteristic of herself.

Beatrice looks up happily at him. A woman is always at her very best when she is alone with the man she loves. Unconsciously, all the charms she possesses are displayed in her glistening eyes, and in the colour which comes and goes in her contented face. There is no philtre which

beauty can use, there is neither cosmetic nor rouge, that can give that tender, lovely glow with which successful love transforms even a plain face into radiance and fascination.

“I wish, Beatrice, you would let me speak to your father,” continues Herbert; “I cannot bear to be here under false pretences. Why will you not let me deal fairly and openly with your parents?”

“And be sent about your business by the evening train. No, thank you! My dear boy, speaking to papa would be as much use as speaking to the butler; they would both of them refer you instantly to mamma; and with an equally lamentable result. Please leave things to me. When mamma has offered me ineffectually to every marriageable man in Meadowshire, she will get quite sick of it, and, I daresay, I shall be allowed to do as I like then, without any more fuss.”

“And how long is this process to last?”

“About a year; by which time Geraldine will be nearly eighteen, and ready to step

into my shoes. Mamma will be glad enough to be rid of me then, and to try her hand upon her instead. Geraldine is meek and tractable, and will be quite willing to do as she is told."

"And, meanwhile, what am I to do?"

"You? You are to make love to Sophy Macpherson. Do you not know that she is the excuse for your having been asked here at all?"

"I don't like it, Beatrice," repeats her lover, gravely—not, however, alluding to the duties relating to Miss Macpherson, which she has been urging upon him. "Upon my life, I don't." He looks away moodily out of the window. "I hate doing things on the sly. And, besides, I am a poor man and your parents are rich. I could not afford to support a wife at present, on my own income."

"All the more reason that we should wait," she interrupts, quickly.

"Yes; but I ought not to have spoken to you; I'd no business to steal your heart.

" You did not steal it," she says, up to his side. " I presented it to you gratis."

Where is the man who could resist an appeal! Away went duty, prudence, every other laudable consideration, winds, and Herbert Pryme straight away came insanely and blissfully oblivious of his own poverty, of Mr. Miller's wealth, everything else upon earth and unknown that was not entirely and indeed delightful and ecstatic.

" You will do as I tell you ? " says Beatrice.

" Of course I will," answers he. And then there is a complete stagnation of the power of speech on both sides, space of five minutes, during which time the clock ticking steadily on at the far end of the corridor has things entirely its own way.

" There is another couple who are walking about," says Herbert Pryme, breaking the complete silence at length, and indicating, by a gesture, two people who are wandering slowly along the corridor.

the garden. Beatrice Miller, following the direction of his eyes, sees Maurice Kynaston and Vera.

"Those two?" she exclaims. "Oh dear, no! They are not happy—not in our way. Miss Nevill is engaged to his brother, you know."

"Umph! if I were Sir John Kynaston I would look after my brother, then."

"Herbert! what *can* you mean?" cries Beatrice, opening her eyes in astonishment. "Why, Captain Kynaston is supposed to be engaged to Mrs. Romer; at any rate, she is desperately in love with him."

"Yes, everybody knows that; but is he in love with her?"

"Herbert, I am sure you must be mistaken!" persists Beatrice, eagerly.

"Perhaps I am. Never mind, little woman," kissing her lightly; "I only said they looked happy. If you will take the trouble to remark them through the day, you will, perhaps, be struck by the same blissful aspect that I have noticed. If they

are happy, it won't last long. Why should not one be glad to see other people enjoying themselves? Let them be happy, whilst they can."

Herbert Pryme was right. Maurice and Vera wandering, side by side, along the broad gravel walks in the wintry gardens, were happy—without so much as venturing to wonder what it was that made them so.

"I did not want to hunt to-day," Maurice is saying; "I thought I would stop at home and talk to you."

"That was kind of you," answers Vera, with a smile.

If she had known him better, she would have been more sensible of the compliment implied. To give up a day's hunting for a woman's sake, is what very few keen sportsmen have been known to do; the attraction must be great indeed.

"You will go out, of course, on Monday, the day the hounds meet here? I should like to see you on a horse."

"I shall, at all events, put on a habit and

get up on the mare John has given me. But I know very little of English hunting ; I have only ridden in Italy. We used to go out, in winter, over the Campagna—that is very different to England."

" You must look very well in a habit ; " he turned to look at her as he spoke. There was no reticence in his undisguised admiration of her.

Vera laughed a little. " You shall look at me if you like, when I have it on," she said, blushing faintly under his scrutiny.

" I am grateful to you for the permission ; but I am bound to confess that I should look all the same had you forbidden me to do so."

Vera was pleased. She felt glad that he admired her. Was it not quite right and most desirable that her husband's brother should appreciate her beauty and ratify his good taste ?

" When does your mother come ? " she said, changing the subject quietly, but without effort.

"Only the very night of the ball, I am afraid. Tuesday, is it not?"

"Have you written to her about me? She does not like me, I fear."

"No; I will not write. She shall see you and judge for herself. I am not the least afraid of her not liking you when she knows you; and you will love her."

By this time they had wandered away from the house, through the belt of shrubbery, and had emerged beyond upon the margin of the pool of water.

Vera stood still, suddenly struck with the sight.

"Is this Shadonake Bath?" she asked, below her breath.

"Yes; have you never seen it before?" he answered, in some surprise.

"Never. I have not lived in Meadowshire long, you know, and the Millers were moving into the house and furnishing it, all last summer. I have never been in the gardens till to-day. How strangely sad the place looks! Let us walk round it."

They went round to the further side.

The pool of water lay dark and silent within its stone steps ; not a ripple disturbed its surface ; not a dead leaf rested on its bosom. Only the motionless water looked up everlastingly at the grey winter skies above, and reflected them back blackly and gloomily upon its solemn face.

Vera stood still and looked at it. Something in its aspect—she could not have told what—affected her powerfully. She went down two or three steps towards the water, and stooped over it intently.

Maurice, watching her curiously, saw, to his surprise, that she trembled. She turned round to him.

“ Does it not look dark and deep ? Is it very deep ? ”

“ I believe it is. There are all sorts of stories about it. Come up, Vera, why do you tremble so ? ”

“ How dreadful to be drowned here ! ” she said, below her breath, and she shuddered.

He stretched out his hand to her.

“ Do not say such horrid things ! Give me your hand—the steps are slippery. What has put drowning into your head ? And—why, how pale you are ; what has frightened you ? ”

She took his hand and came back again to where he stood.

“ Do you believe in presentiments ? ” she said, slowly, with her eyes fixed still, as though by some fascination, upon the dark waters beneath them.

“ Not in the very least,” he answered, cheerily ; “ do not think of such things. John would be the first to scold you—and to scold me, for bringing you here.”

He stood, holding her hand, looking at her kindly and compassionately ; suddenly she looked at him, and as their eyes met once more, she trembled from head to foot.

“ Vera, you are frightened ; tell me what it is ! ”

“ I don’t know ! I don’t know ! ” she cried, with a sudden wail, like a person in pain ;

“only—oh ! I wish I had not seen it for the first time with *you* !”

Before he could answer her, some one, beckoning to them from the further side of the pool, caused them both to turn suddenly round.

It was not only Herbert Pryme who had seen them wander away down the garden, from the house. Mrs. Romer, too, had been at another window, and had noticed them. To run lightly upstairs, put on her hat and jacket, and to follow them, had been the work of but a very few minutes. Helen was not minded to allow Maurice to wander about all the morning with Vera.

“Are you going for a walk ?” she called out to them, across the water. “Wait for me ; I am coming with you.”

Vera turned quickly to her companion.

“Is it true that you are engaged to her ?” she asked him rapidly, in a low voice.

Maurice hesitated. Morally speaking, he was engaged to her ; but then, it had been agreed between them that he was to deny

any such engagement. He felt singularly disinclined to let Vera know what was the truth.

"People say you are," she said, once more. "Will you tell me if it is true?"

"No; there is no engagement between us," he answered, gravely.

"I am very glad," she answered, earnestly. He coloured, but he had no time to ask her why she was glad—for Helen came up to them.

"How interested you look in each other's conversation!" she said, looking suspiciously at them both. "May I not hear what you have been talking about?"

"Anybody might hear," answered Vera, carelessly, "were it worth one's while to take the trouble of repeating it."

Maurice said nothing. He was angry with Helen for having interrupted them, and angry with himself for having denied his semi-engagement. He stood looking away from them both, prodding his stick into the gravel walk.

For half a minute they stood silently together.

"Let us go on," said Vera, and they began to walk.

Once again, in the days that were to come, those three stood side by side upon the margin of Shadonake Bath.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MEET AT SHADONAKE.

MRS. MACPHERSON had brought up her daughters with one fixed and predominant idea in her mind. Each of them was to excel in some one taste or accomplishment, by virtue of which they might be enabled to shine in society. They were taught to do one thing well. Thus, Sophy, the eldest, played the piano remarkably well, whilst Jessie painted in water-colours with charming exactitude and neatness. They had both had first-rate masters, and no pains had been spared to make each of them proficient in the accomplishment that had been selected for her. But, as neither of these young ladies had any natural talent, the result was hardly so satisfactory as their fond mother could have desired. They did exactly what they had been taught to do,

with precision and conscientiousness ; no less and no more ; and the further result of their entire devotion to one kind of study was, that they could do nothing else.

Mrs. Macpherson began to realize that her system of education had possibly left something to be desired on the Monday morning that Mr. Esterworth brought up his hounds to Shadonake House. It was provoking to see all the other ladies attired in their habits, whilst her own daughters had to come down to breakfast in their ordinary morning dresses, because they had never been taught to ride.

“ Are you not going to ride ? ” she heard Guy Miller ask of Sophy, who was decidedly the best looking and the pleasantest of the sisters.

“ No, we have never ridden at all ; mamma never thought we had the time for it,” answers Sophy.

“ I think,” said Mrs. Macpherson, turning to her hostess, “ that I shall pursue a different course with my younger girls. I feel

sorry now that Sophy and Jessie do not ride. Music and painting are, of course, the most charming accomplishments that a woman can have ; but still, it is not at all times that they are useful."

" No, you cannot be always painting and playing."

" Neither can you be always riding," said Mrs. Macpherson, with some asperity, for there was a little natural jealousy between these ladies on the subject of their girls ; " but still—"

" But still, you will acknowledge that I have done right in letting Beatrice hunt. You may be quite sure that there is no accomplishment which brings a girl so much into notice in the country. Look at her now."

Mrs. Macpherson looked, and saw Beatrice in her habit at the far end of the dining-room, surrounded by a group of men in pink, and she also saw her own daughters sitting neglected by themselves on the other side of the room. She made no observation upon the contrast, for it would hardly have been

polite to have done so ; but she made a mental note of the fact that Mrs. Miller was a very clever woman, and that, if you want an ugly daughter to marry, you had better let her learn how to ride across country. And she, furthermore, decided that her third daughter, Alice, who was not blessed with the gift of beauty, should forthwith abandon the cultivation of a very feeble and uncertain vocal organ and be sent to the nearest riding-school the very instant she returned to her home.

Beatrice Miller rode very well indeed ; it was the secret of her uncle's affection for her, and many a good day's sport had the two enjoyed, side by side, across the flat fields and the strong fences and wide ditches of their native country. Her brothers, Guy and Edwin, were fond of hunting, too, but they rode clumsily and awkwardly, floundering across country in what their uncle called, contemptuously, a thoroughly " provincial style." But Beatrice had the true Esterworth seat and hand ; she looked as if she

were born to her saddle, and, in truth, she was never so happy as when she was in it. It was a proof of how great and real was her love to Herbert Pryme that she fully recognised that, in becoming his wife, she would have to live in London entirely and to give up her beloved hunting for his sake.

A woman who rides, as did Beatrice, was sure to be popular on a hunting morning; and, with the consciousness of her lover's hands resting upon the back of her chair, with her favourite uncle by her side, and with several truly ardent admirers of her good riding about her, Miss Miller was evidently enjoying herself thoroughly.

The scene, indeed, was animated to the last degree. The long dining-room was filled with guests, the table was covered with good things, a repast half breakfast, half luncheon, being laid out upon it. Everybody helped themselves, with much chattering and laughter, and there was a pleasant sense of haste and excitement, and a charming informality about the proceed-

ings, which made the Shadonake Hunt breakfast, which Tom Esterworth had been prevailed upon by his niece's entreaties to allow, a thorough and decided success.

Outside there were the hounds, drawn up in patient expectation on the grass beyond the gravel sweep, the bright coats and velvet caps of the men, and the grey horses—on which it was the Meadowshire tradition that they should be always mounted—standing out well against the dark background of the leafless woods behind. Then there were a goodly company who had not dismounted, and to whom glasses of sherry were being handed by the servants, and who also were chattering to each other, or to those on foot, whilst before the door, an object of interest to those within as to those without, Sir John Kynaston was putting Miss Nevill upon her horse.

There was not a man present who did not express his admiration for her beauty and her grace; hardly a woman who did not instantly make some depreciatory remark.

The latter fact spoke perhaps more convincingly for the undoubted success she had created than did the former.

Maurice was standing by one of the dining-room windows, Mrs. Romer, as usual, by his side. He alone, perhaps, of all the men who saw her vault lightly into her saddle, made no audible remark, but perhaps his admiration was all too plainly written in his eyes, for it called forth a contemptuous remark from his companion,—

“ She is a great deal too tall to look well on a horse; those big women should never ride.”

“ What! not with a figure so perfect as hers ? ”

“ Yes, that is the third time you have spoken about her figure to-day,” said Helen, irritably. “ What on earth can you see in it ? ” for Mrs. Romer, who was slight almost to angularity, was, as all thin women are, openly indignant at the masculine foible for more flowing outlines, which was displayed with greater candour than discretion by her quasi-lover.

"What do I see in it?" repeated Maurice, who was dimly conscious of her jealousy, and was injudicious enough to lose his temper slightly over its exhibition. "I see in it the beauty of a goddess, and the perfection of a woman!"

"Really!" with a sarcastic laugh; "how wonderfully enthusiastic and poetical you become over Miss Nevill's charms; it is something quite new in you, Maurice. Your interest in this 'goddess-like' young lady strikes me as singularly warmly expressed; it is more lover-like than fraternal."

"What do you mean?" he said, looking at her coldly and angrily. Helen had seen that look of hard contempt in his face before; she quailed a little before it, and was frightened at what she had said.

"Of course," she said, reddening, "I know it's all right; but it does really sound peculiar, your admiring her so much; and—and—it is hardly flattering to me."

"I don't see that it has anything to do

with you," and he turned shortly away from her.

She made a step or two after him. "You will ride with me, will you not, Maurice? You know I can't go very hard; you might give me a lead or two, and keep near me."

"You must not ask me to make any promises," he said, politely, but coldly. "Guy Miller says there is a groom told off to look after you ladies. Of course, if I can be of any use to you, I shall be happy, but it is no use making rash engagements as to what one will do in a run."

"Come, come, it's time we were off," cries out Tom Esterworth, at the further end of the room, and his stalwart figure makes its way in the direction of the door.

In a very few minutes, the order "to horse," has gone forth, and the whole company have sallied forth and are busy mounting their horses in front of the house.

Off goes the master, well in front, at a sharp trot, towards the woods on the

further slope of the hill, and off go the hounds and the whips, and the riders, in a long and gay procession after him, down the wide avenue.

"Promise me you will not stop out long, Vera," says Sir John to her, as they go, side by side, down the drive. You look white and tired as it is. Have you got a headache?"

"Yes, a little," confesses Vera, with a blush. "I did not sleep well."

"This sitting up late, night after night, is not good for you," says her lover, anxiously; "and there is the ball to-morrow night."

"Yes; and I want to look my best for your mother," she said, smiling. "I will take care of myself, John; I will go home early, in time for lunch."

"You are always so ready to do what I ask you. Oh, Vera, how good you are! how little I deserve such a treasure!"

"Don't," she answers, almost sharply, whilst an expression of pain contracts her

brow for an instant. “Don’t say such things to me, John ; don’t call me good.”

John Kynaston looks at her fondly. “I will not call you anything you don’t wish,” he says, gently, “but I am free to think it, Vera !”

The first covert is successfully drawn without much delay. A fox is found, and breaks away across the open, and a short but sharp burst of fifteen or twenty minutes follows. The field is an unusually large one, and there are many out who are not in it at all. Beatrice, however, is well up, and so is Herbert Pryme, who is not likely to be far from her side. Close behind them follows Sir John Kynaston, and Mrs. Romer, who is well mounted upon one of Edwin Miller’s horses, keeps well up with the rest.

Vera never quite knew how it was that somehow or other she got thrown out of that short but exciting run. She was on the wrong side of the covert, to begin with ; several men were near her, but they were all strangers, and at the time “Gone away!”

was shouted, there was no one to tell her which way to take. Two men took the left side of the copse, three others turned to the right. Vera followed the latter, and found that the hounds must have gone in the opposite direction, for when she got round the wood, not a trace of them was to be seen.

She did not know the country well, and she hardly knew which way to turn. It seemed to her, however, that by striking across a small field to the left of her she would cut off a corner, and eventually come up with the hounds again.

She turned her mare short round, and put her at a big straggling hedge which she had no fears of her being unable to compass. There was, however, more of a drop on the further side than she had counted upon, and in some way, as the mare landed, floundering on the further side, something gave way, and she found that her stirrup-leather had broken.

Vera pulled up and looked about her

helplessly. She found herself in a small spinney of young birch-trees, filling up the extremity of a triangular field, into which she had come. Not a sign of the hounds, or, indeed, of any living creature, was to be seen in any direction. She did not feel inclined to go on—or even to go back home with her broken stirrup-leather. It occurred to her that she would get off and see what she could do towards patching it together herself.

With some little difficulty, her mare being fidgetty, and refusing to stand still, she managed to dismount; but in doing so her wrist caught against the pommel of her saddle, and was so severely wrenched backwards, as she sprang to the ground, that she turned quite sick with the pain.

It seemed to her that her wrist must be sprained; at all events, her right hand was, for the minute, perfectly powerless. The mare, perceiving that nothing further was expected of her, amused herself by cropping the short grass at her feet, whilst Vera

stood by her side, in dire perplexity as to what she was to do next. Just then she heard the welcome sound of a horse's hoofs in the adjoining field, and in another minute a hat and black coat, followed by a horse's head and forelegs, appeared on the top of the fence, and a man dropped over into the spinney, just ten yards in front of her.

Vera took it to be her lover, for the brothers both hunted in black, and there was a certain family resemblance between their broad shoulders and the square set of their heads. She called out eagerly,

“ Oh, John ! how glad I am to see you ! I have come to grief ! ”

“ So I see ; but I am not John. I hope, however, I may do as well. What is the matter ? ”

“ It is you, Maurice ? Oh, yes, you will do quite as well. I have broken my stirrup-leather, and I am afraid I have sprained my wrist.”

“ That sounds bad—let me see.”

In an instant he had sprung from his horse to help her.

She looked up at him as he came, pushing the tall brushwood away, as he stepped through it. It struck her suddenly how like he was to the photograph she had found of him at Kynaston, long ago, and what a well-made man he was, and how brave and handsome he looked in his hunting gear.

“How have you managed to hurt your wrist? Let me see it.”

“I wrenched it, somehow, in jumping down; but I don’t think that it can be sprained, for I find I can move it now a little; it is only bruised, but it hurts me horribly.”

She turned back her cuff and held out the injured hand to him. Maurice stooped over it. There was a moment’s silence; the two horses stood waiting patiently by; the solitary fields lay bare and lifeless on every side of them; the little birch-trees rustled mysteriously overhead; the leaden sky, with its chill curtain of unbroken grey cloud spread monotonously above them; there

was no living thing in all the winter landscape besides, to listen or to watch them.

Suddenly Maurice Kynaston caught the hand that he held to his lips, and pressed half a dozen passionate kisses upon its outstretched palm.

It was the work of half a minute, and in the next Maurice felt as if he should die of shame and remorse.

“ For God’s sake forgive me ! ” he cried, brokenly. “ I am a brute—I forgot myself—I must be mad, I think ; for Heaven’s sake tell me that I have not offended you past forgiveness, Vera ! ”

His pulses were beating wildly, his face was flushed, the hands that still held hers shook with a nameless emotion ; he looked imploringly into her face, as if to read his sentence in her eyes, but what he saw there arrested the torrent of repentance and regret that was upon his lips.

Upon Vera’s face there was no flush either of shame or anger. No storm of indignation, no passion of insulted feeling ;

only eyes wide open and terror-stricken, that met his with the unspeakable horror that one sees sometimes in those of a hunted animal. She was pale as death. Then suddenly the colour flushed hotly back into her face ; she averted her eyes.

“ Let me go home,” she said in a faint voice; “ help me to get on to my horse, Maurice.”

There was neither resentment nor anger in her voice, only a great weariness.

He obeyed her in silence. Possibly he felt that he had stood for one instant upon the verge of a precipice, and that miraculously her face had saved him, he knew not how, where words would only have dragged him down to unutterable ruin.

What had it been that had thus saved him ? What was the meaning of that terror that had been written in her lovely eyes ? Since she was not angry, what had she feared ?

Maurice asked himself these questions vainly all the way home. Not a word was

spoken between them, they rode in absolute silence side by side until they reached the house.

Then, as he lifted her off her horse at the hall-door, he whispered,

“Have you forgiven me?”

“There was nothing to forgive,” she answered in a low, strained voice. She spoke wearily, as one who is suffering physical pain. But as she spoke, the hand that he still held seemed almost, to his fancy, to linger for a second with a gentle fluttering pressure within his grasp.

Miss Nevill went into the house, having utterly forgotten that she had sprained her wrist; a fact which proves indisputably, I suppose, that the injury could not have been of a very serious nature.

END OF VOL. I.

1

6



L

